

THE ORDINARY RUNNER

Life, Pain and Purpose

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Writing a book may appear to be a solitary act, but it rarely begins that way.

I am grateful to a few friends who encouraged me, often more than once, to sit down and put my pen to paper. Their quiet belief that these stories were worth telling helped me begin a journey I might otherwise have postponed indefinitely.

For that encouragement and friendship, I remain thankful.

Dedicated To

To my daughters, Tanvi and Ipsha, the quiet joy of my life, and to the countless runners I have shared the road with — those ahead of me, those beside me and those who quietly finish just before the cut-off. You continue to remind me why running matters.

Preface

“The miracle isn’t that I finished. The miracle is that I had the courage to start.” - John Bingham

I have always felt overshadowed by the extraordinary, marked by quiet ordinariness.

Born into a lower-middle-class family and raised in a small town, I was above average in studies and unremarkable in sports. I only received one sports certificate, which was for being an extra on my house’s handball team. Nothing in my early years indicated I would one day attempt marathons and ultramarathons. If anything, the only consistent trait about me back then was my ordinariness.

Running found me and stayed. My first triumph was a breathless 2-3 kilometres at school — harder than it sounds. In households like ours, sports were luxuries. Dreams took a back seat to responsibilities. Running was for others; we had to study, get jobs, and build our lives around them. Later, at the National Defence Academy, running became a necessity. Between drills and discipline, running quietly became part of me.

Years went by. I ran 10Ks. Half-marathons. 25Ks. 20-milers. Full marathons. Eventually, even a few ultras. My first official event was in January 2012 — the Standard Chartered Mumbai Marathon. I remember standing at the start line that morning, feeling completely out of place amid thousands of confident-looking runners. I had no strategy, no race plan. Only the simple hope that I would reach the finish line intact. And reach it I did. That morning changed something in me.

Over the years, I have slowed down considerably. I am proud of people in my age group and even of those older than me who run faster than I do. Super motivational, right! But sorry, I can't do that. I don't want to do that. I want to enjoy the bliss of running while collecting finisher medals. I now run every race with one eye fixed firmly on the cut-off time. I have run, trotted, shuffled, walked and occasionally crawled toward finish lines. On two or three occasions, the organisers had begun dismantling the arch by the time I approached it. But a finish is a finish, and a medal earned within the cut-off is still a medal.

I've faced injuries, self-doubt, and bad runs. One stands out: an ordinary Sunday training run. Life then was heavy with painful conversations and silences. At the 14 km mark, legs burning, mind wandering, I thought: "If I can keep running now, maybe I can handle anything." That realisation shaped the runner – and person – I am today.

That's why I call myself an "ordinary runner." Others pass by smoothly and effortlessly. I admire them, but I don't envy them. My experience has shown me this: at every pace, hope and purpose are present. Every runner, whether fast or slow, runs for reasons that words can hardly express.

Why write this book? Because I've shown up – consistently, stubbornly, and sometimes foolishly – since my first 2K in 1991. I've faced work challenges, personal storms, and uncertain times. I understand that many others run not for glory but for sanity and strength.

This book is for the late starters, middle-aged athletes, early-morning plodders, cut-off chasers, weekend warriors, slow joggers, walk-run believers, and those who run to keep themselves together. This isn't about winning. It's about returning. It's about showing up when no one is watching and choosing the harder road when easier exits tempt. If even one

reader chooses to run — without shame, self-doubt, or comparing paces — this book has done its job.

Settle in. This is the story of an ordinary man who learned that the loudest cheers often echo in silence, far from any podium. If you've ever felt too slow or too late, know this: you belong here.

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PART-1

CHAPTER 1

Early Days

*“To begin is the most important part of any pursuit.” - Haile
Gebrselassie*

I was born on 02 December 1976 in Purulia, West Bengal, at 10:10 AM. Recently, I looked at my birth chart — more out of boredom than belief. I smiled at the symmetry: 10:10, the kind of time that flatters clock ads. Later, on a whim, I asked ChatGPT, “Do my birth details suggest a runner’s personality?” The reply was full of enthusiasm — grit, endurance, and unwavering discipline. Flattering, really. I wish ChatGPT had existed when I was young, so I could have shown my dad that conversation. If he knew I was astrologically cleared to run, maybe my childhood would have had fewer scoldings and more nods of support. But life rarely gives such timely foresight.

My real world began in Bokaro Steel City, where my father used to work. Bokaro was the epitome of quiet middle-class India: steel plant sirens, identical quarters, endlessly straight roads, scooter engines coughing to start in the morning, and kids cycling to school in their neatly ironed uniforms. Life was structured and predictable, built around the silent promise that if you studied hard, kept your head down, avoided trouble, and followed the standard route, you would grow into a respectable, stable adult. That was fine, except a small part of me — tiny, almost invisible — occasionally wondered what lay outside that safe, predictable frame.

Childhood in Bokaro was simple, in the most comforting sense. Winter mornings arrived shrouded in fog. Evenings

echoed with children shouting across playgrounds. The smoking chimneys of the steel plant loomed in the background. Inside our home, my mother bustled around, and my father read the newspaper as the gentle hum of life created a sense of safety and stability. Like most middle-class families, ours was anchored by school, report cards, homework, and the expectation that I would choose engineering or medicine. These weren't just careers; they were pillars of social survival. Everything else was experimental. Risky. Sports, for example.

Still, I was a fairly active kid. Not a star; not the school champion. I wasn't the one teachers singled out: "This one will go far." Instead, I was a curious, energetic boy outdoors at every opportunity. In our world, coaching academies, running clubs, and sports apps didn't exist. Talent was discovered by accident — maybe when a teacher yelled from afar, "You there! Come here. Run. Let me see." Sometimes your name landed on a list; sometimes not. But running — freedom mixed with pain — slipped quietly into my life.

I can't recall the exact day I first ran just for the sake of running. It wasn't planned. No revelation. No epiphany. It started as most things do — quietly, without fanfare. I ran between cricket overs or while chasing a lost ball, or when racing friends on bicycles (often losing, but trying anyway). Sometimes I ran alone, drawn by the comfort of the evening air. Gradually, my feet found their own rhythm.

One day, I pushed myself to what must have been around three kilometres — though back then, we didn't measure distance. Our unit of measurement was simple: If you finished the run standing, it was "short." If you finished bent over with your hands on your knees, it was "long." If you were lying on the ground afterwards, it was "too long." That day, I finished in the "bent over" category, breathing hard, heart pounding, but with an inexplicable sense of achievement swelling inside me. It was the

first time I felt I had done something that belonged entirely to me. Not to school, not to my parents' expectations, not to society's checklist. Just me. My breath. My legs. My will. A tiny spark — unnoticed by everyone except me — had been lit. Let me describe my first running gear: Shoes: White, flat, canvas. The kind Bata sold for school PT periods. Socks: Optional. Shorts: Hand-me-downs. T-shirt: Anything old enough that my mother didn't worry about stains.

I didn't look like a runner, but I felt like one. My father, however, felt differently. He never said, "Don't run," but his expressions conveyed quiet disapproval. Middle-class logic was simple: running makes you tired. Tired boys can't study. Boys who don't study can't become engineers. Boys who don't become engineers... well, the thought wasn't worth finishing. So, every time he saw me return, sweating and panting, he frowned the way only Indian fathers can — a mix of concern, mild irritation, and a silent prayer that I'd focus on trigonometry instead. I tried to stop. I tried to behave. But guilt is weak when joy is strong. So, I ran — discreetly, as some boys sneak out to meet girlfriends. Except my girlfriend was on the open road, and she never complained when I arrived, sweating.

Class X ended. Boards came and went. I survived. Then came the Science stream — the great funnel through which all Indian middle-class kids were expected to pass. PCM became my new universe. Coaching centres, tuition timings, thick textbooks, and teachers who believed humour was a distraction from life's seriousness. Running had to be done discreetly now. Academic expectations were heavy. My father's disappointment (whenever marks dipped) became a silent force shaping my days. Yet I still found time to run — in stolen pockets of evening light, in short bursts after cricket, or in occasional longer runs when everyone assumed I was playing outside. Running became my refuge. My escape. It was the one place where marks didn't

matter, formulas didn't chase me, and no one asked, "Beta, syllabus kitna ho gaya?" (Son, how much of the syllabus have you completed?)

Every runner has a story about the day they realised that the sport can be cruel. Mine happened during a 1500m school race in Class XI. I wasn't among the favourites, but I believed I could at least finish with dignity. The gun went off, and for the first few hundred metres, I felt okay. By 800m, I felt less okay. Around the final lap, the sun seemed too bright. By the time I finished, the winner had drunk water, chatted with friends, and possibly considered a second degree. As I crossed the finish line, a girl from my class approached — genuinely kind, genuinely sympathetic — and said, "It's okay. Nice try." Those two words hit harder than the lactic acid. "Nice try" is what teachers say when your science project collapses. It is the consolation prize you never asked for. But that day it did something quietly powerful. I realised I wasn't naturally gifted, not exceptionally fast, not destined for the podium. Yet despite the embarrassment, I still loved running. That strange, stubborn affection stayed with me.

The year was 1993. One afternoon, a friend casually mentioned the National Defence Academy (NDA). In our small town, NDA wasn't seen as a serious first-choice career. It was fascinating, yes, but distant — something "other people" did. But the idea caught on among a group of us. Partly because it sounded exciting. Partly because it meant travelling to a new city for the exam, free from parental supervision, even if only for a few days. And partly because it felt like a different path in a world where all roads seemed to lead only to engineering colleges. A small flame inside me flickered. A sense of possibility. Something new. Something not written in the standard script.

I joined my friends and travelled to Patna for the written exam. Before the trip, I cut my hair very short — "zero cut," as I

proudly called it. Even though I had no idea what military life was like, the haircut made me feel... prepared — a kind of psychological uniform. Patna was chaos. Crowded roads, noisy buses, exam centres packed with boys from every corner of the state, all pretending to look confident. I remember walking into that hall filled with a mix of excitement and curiosity. Oddly, I wasn't afraid. Maybe because, at that age, fear hadn't yet learned to speak loudly in my mind. I returned home. Life went on. And months later, the results came. I had passed. No one was more surprised than I was. No one except my father, perhaps! Telling my father about the result remains one of those deeply etched memories. He didn't reject the idea. He didn't dismiss it. He simply listened quietly. Maybe he sensed I wasn't meant for engineering. Maybe he saw something in my eyes that I didn't. Maybe he realised that the boy who always came home sweating and breathless from runs had finally found a place where that habit wasn't a liability. And just like that, the world shifted.

For the first time, I had a legitimate reason to run - the SSB would expect physical fitness, and my father couldn't object to my preparation. So, I ran freely — guiltless, unapologetic, with purpose. Every evening run felt like reclaiming a part of myself I had long kept hidden. Every morning jog felt like the opening chapter of a new life. I travelled to Varanasi for the SSB. I passed. I was selected. I was going to the National Defence Academy. At that time, I didn't understand what that meant. How could I? At 17, the world was a map with many colours but few details. I only knew one thing - Running — the small, persistent, often ridiculed part of my childhood — was finally going to matter.

When I look back now, I see that nothing about my early years was dramatic. But it was honest. It taught me how to stay ordinary without feeling small — and how to keep running even when the world laughed. These were the foundations of the runner I would eventually become. I didn't realise it then, but my

journey as a runner didn't begin in marathons or ultras. It began on those Bokaro roads... In those worn-out canvas shoes... With no audience, no finish line, no timing chip... Just a boy running because something inside him whispered, "This feels right." And with that whisper still echoing softly somewhere in my heart, I stepped towards a future that waited behind the gates of the National Defence Academy — a future I couldn't imagine. A future I was entirely unprepared for. A future that would change me in ways I had never expected.

CHAPTER 2

Joining NDA

“Running is not about being better than someone else. It’s about being better than who you used to be.”

-Unknown, popularised by Bill Bowerman

NDA.... Where do I start talking about the place? My alma mater. The place where I spent my crucial formative years. It has been years since I graduated, but every memory of that place is permanently etched in my memory. As the saying goes, NDA is in DNA.

It’s strange how life-changing moments often arrive quietly. There’s no drumroll, no spotlight — just a letter, an envelope, or a few printed words that suddenly tilt your world. For me, that moment came in Apr 1994. I had cleared my NDA entrance. It was there in the Employment News. Then, on a quiet afternoon, the envelope containing my joining instructions arrived. You are required to report to the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, Pune, on ____ Jun 1994. I stared at the date for a long time. This was not a dream, not a plan, not a hypothetical “maybe someday.” This was real. I was going to join the Academy. My mother fussed with my packing — shirts folded perfectly, a towel smelling faintly of the detergent she trusted for years, small reminders of home tucked carefully into the corners of the suitcase and the holdall (yeah, the joining orders asked us to carry a holdall). My father maintained his usual restrained expression, but something in his eyes softened every time he looked at me. Maybe pride, maybe worry, maybe both.

On the assigned date, I boarded the train from Dhanbad to Kalyan, where I had to change trains for Pune. My father had accompanied me to the station to see me off, and we both fought back tears. Across from me were two other boys with the same letter in their hands. I didn't know it then, but over the next three years, those letters would turn us into cadets, comrades, and something far more permanent — brothers forged in sweat, exhaustion, and the shared madness that defines NDA. The journey took over 36 hours, and as the train cut through the countryside, I wondered what awaited me. I had seen the NDA photograph in magazines — Sudan Block standing tall and majestic — but photographs could never capture the reality of leaving home at seventeen, with nothing but a suitcase full of belongings and a head full of questions. I was excited. I was terrified. But more than anything, I felt ready. Or so I thought!

As Pune station approached, my palms grew damp with a nervous excitement I had never felt before. I reported to the Reception Cell at the station, where my credentials were checked, and we were asked to board the bus waiting outside. The air inside smelled faintly of leather, dust, and fresh beginnings. As the bus rolled out of Pune city, the landscape changed — fewer buildings, more open skies. And then, suddenly, there it was: the dome of Sudan Block. When one drives to NDA from Pashan, there comes a point when the dome of the Sudan Block is visible from far, standing tall and proud, lording over the surroundings. The sight was intimidating in the way only institutions of immense legacy can be. Sudan Block had watched generations of boys arrive as civilians and leave as cadets ready to bear the burden of leadership as officers in the Indian Armed Forces. And now, I was about to walk through the same gates.

As we entered, the road curved gently, lined with massive trees. The air felt fresher than anything I had breathed in Bokaro.

I watched the majestic buildings pass by, and then came the Ashoka Pillar, with the mighty Sudan Block in the background — tall, regal, glowing in the setting sun's reflection. Someone behind me whispered, half in awe, half in disbelief, “This is it.” And it truly was. All the stories, the legends, the films, the newspaper clippings — suddenly they weren't stories anymore. They were walls and buildings and drill squares, and men in uniform walking with a sense of purpose I had never seen before. Walking into NDA felt like stepping into a different universe. A universe where the rules were unknown, the expectations sky-high, and the margin for error non-existent.

The settling-in process was a blur of activity. We were marched into an office, where an officer inspected our documents. Even before I understood what was happening, someone yelled, “Next!” and I moved along with the crowd like a leaf in a river. We were allotted squadrons. I was assigned to Oscar Squadron — my home for the next three years. I was driven to the Squadron. It being a Saturday evening, it was all very quiet. I was met by a senior who checked and confirmed my antecedents and asked me to share a room with a fellow first-termer. Thankfully, the guy turned out to be someone I knew from my SSB. And then the flow of information began. It was a deluge, too much for me to absorb in a single session. All I could gather was that I should finish my dinner and sleep early, as things would get busy from the next morning.

Sunday morning, I woke up to the sound of someone shouting strange things. I later learned that it was a cadet announcing reveille. I came out of my batchmate's cabin and into the corridor. The bathroom was a beehive of activity. Everything was a blur as far as I was concerned. Thank God my batchmate acted like a good chaperone! One more strange announcement, and the entire Squadron found itself on the Squadron parade ground, neatly arranged according to their semester. We call it

terms. I would not be wrong to say that I was acting like a robot all the time. I had no clue and was clearly out of sorts. The guiding hand of course mates and a few sympathetic seniors was carrying me along. The Squadron was informed of my joining by a senior cadet, after which I was asked to introduce myself. I gave a brief account of myself, but what caught the attention of most of those present was my mentioning that I like to run. Some were happy, some curious, and some had that senior waala – we shall see – smile.

That first PT session was brutal. I ran when asked to, lungs burning, legs shaking, still half-asleep. The cold morning air stabbed my face. For a boy who thought he could run decently, I realised very quickly that NDA running was not “running.” It was an assault on every fibre of my being. Yet as I finished the session, a strange pride bloomed inside me. I had survived my first PT period. I didn’t collapse. I didn’t fall out. I didn’t disgrace myself.

My first Monday at the Academy was spent on more paperwork. It was voluminous, to say the least. Then came the visit to QM Fort for kit issue. I was surprised to find that even undergarments and handkerchiefs were included in the kit. Everything smelled of newness and starch – and fear. Especially fear. Sizes didn’t matter, or if they did, not so much. If it fit between “tight enough not to restrict breathing” and “loose enough to avoid asphyxiation,” it was declared perfect. We carried our newly issued belongings to the squadron lines, panting under the load. A senior appeared out of nowhere and barked, “Double up!” I jogged. He yelled louder. I sprinted. He nodded. Welcome to NDA!

Then came the haircut. To this day, I maintain that the barber held personal grudges against every new cadet. He ran the clippers across my scalp with the enthusiasm of a man clearing

jungle foliage. After the haircut, I caught my reflection and almost didn't recognise myself.

On Tuesday, my second day at the Academy, my training commenced. The strange reveille announcement, the morning hustle and bustle, and my first PT period. This time with the ustaads. If I had felt happy about surviving the PT session on Sunday, I was in for a rude shock. Thankfully, it ended, and it was followed by a swimming session. This was my first introduction to a swimming pool. As this was the first class, my instructor wanted to see me swim before classifying me as a swimmer or a weak swimmer. Despite telling him that I hadn't stepped into a pool before, he wanted to see for himself. So, I jumped into the pool to satisfy his curiosity. I went straight down like a rock and came up huffing, puffing, coughing, and whatnot. I was fished out of the water and classified as a 'dead sinker'.

By now, the enormity of the Academy was sinking in. The seniors walked with a confidence I couldn't even dream of imitating. The instructors spoke in commands, not sentences. The schedules left no breathing space. Every minute was accounted for. If you stood still, someone yelled at you. If you stood wrong, someone yelled louder. If you breathed incorrectly, someone corrected you. The famous NDA motto echoed everywhere: "Service Before Self".

One day, soon after I had joined, we first-termers were asked to gather for a run soon after lunch. Running with a full belly was a new experience for me. In the regular scheme of things, one was used to a light warm-up, a run, followed by a cool-down. But NDA was different. There, the boundaries blurred between a warm-up, a run, and the cool-down. By the end of the evening session, I was close to being exhausted. I was cursing myself for not heeding a course mate's advice to take it slow. In my exuberance, I had exerted more than I should have. And then the first moments of doubt arose. Was I good enough? Did I

have it in me to make it through NDA? What if I don't? What if I had overestimated myself?

I got to run at NDA (a lot!), but not always in the way I had imagined. Running at NDA is very different from what one would normally imagine. There are multiple reasons and ways to run. One may be required to run in a synchronised fashion within a squad, or otherwise. One runs because one is supposed to, on the play field, while practising for the Inter-Squadron cross-country, or even as punishment. One runs in the morning, after lunch, in the evening, while moving between places, and even after dinner. One runs in the drill square or PT field. To a new cadet who has reported to the Academy, it is complete 'shock and awe'. And I was no different.

By then, I was trying to survive breakfast before lunch and lunch before evening muster. I had thought I was mentally tough. That confidence evaporated around midweek 2. The truth is — NDA doesn't break you with punishments. It breaks you with discipline, intensity, and the relentless demand for excellence. And the first crack in my armour came sooner than expected.

It was a particularly exhausting day — drill in the morning, classes till afternoon, a punishing PT session after that, and running to and from the squadron for reasons known only to the seniors. By evening, the fatigue had settled into my bones. Every muscle ached. My brain felt foggy. My emotions were scrambled. After a quick, chaotic dinner, I found myself sitting on my bed, staring at nothing. A silent panic rose in my chest. *"I can't do this."* *"This is too much."* *"I want to go home."*

Tears blurred my eyes. It wasn't sadness — it was overwhelming exhaustion, a mix of homesickness, fear, and hopelessness. For the first time since joining, I felt like quitting. Somehow, word of my breakdown reached the Divisional Officer, a man whose presence alone could straighten spines. He

called me to his office. His voice was calm, firm, and understanding — a rare combination in the Academy. He didn't scold me. He didn't belittle me. He said, "Yugesh, everything you're feeling right now is normal. Every cadet feels this in the first few weeks. NDA is designed to shock you. But you belong here — even if you don't see it yet." He spoke to me for ten minutes. But those ten minutes lifted a burden no amount of rest could have. When I walked out of his office, I wasn't magically transformed. But I was steadier. Calmer. Ready to try again. Sometimes, all you need is one person to believe in you when you can't believe in yourself.

By the end of the first few weeks, the chaos began to make sense. In a few weeks, I learned to run everywhere, eat fast, sleep faster, decode senior-speak, and wake up as my life depended on it... because half the time, it did. I also learned that NDA doesn't teach you to be strong. It teaches you to be stronger than you think you can be. Running became the one thing I looked forward to — partly because it felt familiar, partly because it was the only time I understood what was happening. At NDA, running wasn't an exercise. It was culture. Identity. A way of life. A tool for moulding boys into cadets. Amidst all these activities, life became a blur. Time for an NDA cadet is elastic. Days feel like weeks. Weeks feel like years. And yet, strangely, months fly.

One evening, during the evening muster, our SCC (Squadron Cadet Captain), who is like the House Captain, announced, "Novices' Run is next week." We froze. Whispers began. Stories circulated. "It's 14 km." "No, 16 km." "No, 10 km, but the route kills you." "You'll faint if you don't hydrate."

"Take ORS." "Don't take ORS — it makes you thirsty." "Wear thick socks."

"Wear thin socks." Every senior had advice. Every senior also had an enigmatic, sinister smile as they gave it. That's when

we realised: the Novices' Run wasn't just a run. It was a rite of passage. A test of endurance. A test of spirit. A test of whether you could belong to an institution that demanded everything and gave nothing free. Being good at running is considered a critical skill at NDA, and this event helps establish the ikki's (the first-termer) credentials for himself, his course, and his squadron. From the second term onwards, these very same cadets get to represent their Squadron in the Inter-Squadron X-Country Competition. In the hyper-competitive environment of NDA, it is a matter of immense pride and honour.

To ensure we were ready, good runners from senior terms were nominated to coach and prepare us for the event. We had hundreds of questions about the route, what could go wrong, pacing strategy, nourishment, kit, etc. While they tried to bridge the gaps, they also told us stories, both real and imagined, about past events. I was happy because I was getting a chance to participate in an event I loved. We were informed about the practice timings of the best runners in the Academy from our course, and based on that, I set a realistic target for myself. I kept striking off dates on my calendar, and with every passing day, the population of butterflies in my stomach only rose. The nervous energy had to be balanced with calmness, but it was difficult. This was no ordinary event. I felt like a real 'novice'. I didn't want to fail, didn't want to let myself and my Squadron down.

I didn't know it then, but that run would become the first real milestone of my life as a runner.

CHAPTER 3

The Novices Cross-Country

“Only those who risk going too far can find out how far one can go.” - T. S. Eliot

Certain days in life become fixed points — moments around which memories orbit long after everything else has faded. In NDA, such days were plentiful, but few carried the same mystique, dread and eventual pride as the Novices’ Cross Country Run. You can forget drill sequences, the exact number of push-ups you were made to do for smiling at the wrong time, even the names of course-mates who vanished from your life after graduating. But you never — ever — forget your novices’ run. Your body makes sure of it. Muscles have an unfortunate ability to preserve trauma longer than the mind.

Although we knew it was scheduled and had been preparing for it, the announcement by SCC the previous evening (Saturday) came across as if we had won a lottery, not a guaranteed appointment with suffering. Once our course had been mustered on the Squadron parade ground, he emerged from his cabin, looked around with mild boredom, and said, “Novices’ cross-country tomorrow morning. Fall in at 0430 Hr.” Then he left. No pause for dramatic effect. No indication that the next twenty-four hours would change our relationship with running — and pain — forever.

After this announcement, an unusually thoughtful silence settled over the course. My course mates and I were pretty much left to our own devices, except for a pep talk from some seniors. They motivated us, for sure, but they also added to the pressure.

Usually, someone would be singing off-key, someone would be polishing shoes with the enthusiasm of a jeweller, and someone else would be telling a wildly exaggerated story from their school sports days. Not today. Today, every cadet sat in their own room, staring at their PT shoes as if they were capable of betrayal. Some tried stretching. Some drank water the way camels drink before crossing the Sahara. One chap loudly claimed he came from a family of sprinters. We later discovered his greatest athletic feat was chasing a bus he had missed.

That night, sleep eluded me. I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling, wondering what the next morning would bring. I felt a strange mix of dread and curiosity. I wasn't a star athlete. I wasn't even a decent one. My glorious day of finishing last in the 1500m back in Bokaro still hung around my neck like a medal of dishonour. But beneath the anxiety, something stirred — an odd belief that maybe I could survive this. Not Excel. Just survive. Sometimes, survival is the bigger victory. I wasn't afraid. Just nervous. Excited. Curious. In some corner of my heart, a small voice whispered: "You've run your whole life. This one will matter." Sleep came in patches. Dreams were an unhelpful preview of what was to come: endless running, me collapsing in slow motion, seniors shaking their heads in disappointment, and a medical officer pronouncing me clinically useless. It was a long night.

Reveille at NDA is always loud, but that morning it felt as if it had been set to a different, more sadistic volume. I jumped out of bed instantly — no one dares take liberties on the morning of a major event. PT shoes on. Running shorts on. Squadron Colour Vest on. The allotted bib number is on. Teeth brushed at the speed of a man fleeing danger. I stepped into the corridor and found everyone wearing the same expression — a cross between determination and impending doom. We mustered on the Squadron Parade Ground. The pre-dawn air was cold

enough to make us question our life choices. A hushed seriousness hung in the air. No jokes. No whispered gossip. Just the silent, shared misery of boys marching toward their fate. The jog to Glider Dome was longer than usual, or maybe it just felt that way. The Academy looked different in that soft, grey-blue hour — more ancient, as though it had watched generations of novices walk toward the same suffering.

Glider Dome, once visible, loomed massive and solemn in the dim light. A vast open field stretched endlessly before us, covered in dew that sparkled faintly in the early hint of sunrise. It looked beautiful, like something out of a postcard. But beauty is often the camouflage of danger. We all knew what this field represented. This was where the run would begin. This was where reputations would quietly shift. This was where the Academy would ask a simple question: Can you endure? Once the final instructions were shouted, we walked to the starting line. There were no seniors stationed along the route — NDA tradition does not allow motivational cheerleaders during the run. If you run, you run alone. If you break, you break alone. If you survive, you earn it. The whistle blew, and the race began. All the novices launched forward with the confidence of Olympic athletes and the biomechanics of panicked chickens.

The first stretch across the open field felt suspiciously good. A soft breeze brushed against us. The dew made the ground slightly slippery but forgiving. Everyone ran too fast, too enthusiastically, as if trying to outrun fear. Expressions ranged from hopeful to delusional. I felt surprisingly light — so light that I briefly wondered whether the Academy had accidentally given me someone else's body. The first kilometre lay shamelessly. It convinced me that running was easy, that today might be my day, that maybe I was not as unfit as I thought. But by the time the second kilometre ended, the field had narrowed into a trail, and

reality — like an unhappy senior — reappeared with full authority. Ahead of us loomed a dark, unforgiving slope. Rape Hill!

Even the name is enough to make grown cadets emotional. Rape Hill is not merely a geographical feature. It is a rite of passage. Unofficially, everyone acknowledges why it's called that, and the consensus is unanimous: the hill does not challenge you — it violates your confidence. From a distance, it looks almost manageable. But appearances, like the first kilometres, lie. The moment we hit the base, gravity announced itself like an angry drill instructor. Thighs began burning instantly. Breathing turned ragged. Steps shortened involuntarily. The trail grew steeper with each metre, and the cadets around me began sounding like a choir of damaged bagpipes. Halfway up, my lungs sent a strongly worded protest letter. At three-quarters, my legs threatened unionisation. One chap ahead of me muttered, “Sir, main toh mar gaya,” (Sir, I'm dead!) though no officer was anywhere in sight. Another was gasping as if he had accidentally swallowed a harmonium. I distinctly remember thinking, “If I faint, at least I won't have to finish the run.” I tried not to walk. Not here. Not on Rape Hill. I would rather explode in a dignified manner.

Reaching the top felt like emerging from underwater after holding your breath too long. The ground levelled out into Table Top — a wide, flat plateau that looked peaceful. Peaceful, unfortunately, is not the same as merciful. Table Top offered a beautiful view. The sun, half risen, cast a golden glow across the Academy. Distant hills and the Pune skyline sharpened into focus. The wind swept across the plateau. It looked like a place where philosophers might sit and contemplate life. We novices contemplated nothing except survival. My breathing sounded like it had been outsourced to a malfunctioning machine. My legs felt like heavy cylinders. The plateau stretched endlessly, mocking my hopes of recovery. Every step reminded me that running is a sport invented by someone who hated comfort.

Yet something strange happened on Table Top. Despite the pain, despite the fatigue, despite the feeling that my internal organs had collectively resigned, I kept going. Maybe it was pride. Maybe it was stubbornness. Maybe it was the faint memory of the boy from Bokaro who had once finished last but was determined never to finish last again. After what felt like several years disguised as minutes, the plateau narrowed into a descending trail. You would think downward slopes feel pleasant. They don't. Especially when your legs, already traumatised by Rape Hill, suddenly have to perform delicate footwork to avoid tripping. I descended with the grace of a wounded giraffe but managed to stay upright.

Once off the slope, the route merged with a long stretch of road — a mild incline, barely noticeable but cruelly persistent. This section did not break you dramatically. It simply wore you down slowly. No scenery to distract you. No change in terrain. No illusions of progress. Just steady suffering. Cadets around me began to spread out. Some ahead, moving like machines. Some behind, making noises illegal in many countries. My mind began its negotiations. “Just slow down a little”. “Walking isn't a crime”. “No one will see you”. “You've done enough”.

“Why are you even doing this?” On any other day, I might have listened. But not today. Today, pride tightened its grip on me. My body was cracking, but my mind was stubborn.

The wall — every runner's sworn enemy — arrived quietly, without fanfare. My legs suddenly felt hollow. Breathing grew harsher. My arms felt heavy. The rhythm faltered. Everything inside me said, “Stop.” But something deeper said, “Not today.” Minutes — or centuries — passed before the road curved, and through the thinning haze, I saw it. Glider Dome! Seeing the Glider Dome felt like being rescued after drifting too long. It didn't erase the pain, but it gave it purpose. My entire body responded to that sight in ways I didn't know were possible.

Energy — tiny, insufficient, but real — rose inside me. My steps quickened. My breathing strengthened. My heart steadied. The final stretch was not elegant. My form must have resembled a man trying to outrun his own collapse. The ground felt harder under my feet. My ears rang. My vision wavered slightly. But I kept going.

The finish line drew closer. A few staff members and early finishers stood there, clapping politely, not excessively. I crossed without theatrics — no collapsing, no chest-thumping, no Bollywood-style fall to the knees. Just a long exhale, a bend at the waist, and breathing that sounded like sandpaper on metal. My legs trembled. My vest was soaked. My mind floated somewhere above my body. Someone guided me toward the enclosure area. Timings were logged against the lead runner's time, with enclosures spaced at two-minute intervals. The fastest went to the first, the respectable ones to the second. The solid, dependable, quietly proud ones often fell in the third. "Cadet, third enclosure," the staff announced. For a moment, I did not react. I simply absorbed the information like someone receiving news in a foreign language. Third enclosure. Not spectacular. Not embarrassing. Solid. Honest. Earned. And for me, that mattered.

Later, in my squadron room, after the shower had washed away the mud and salt, I sat on my bed with the kind of exhaustion that seeps into your bones. The ache was everywhere — legs, back, shoulders, even places where I didn't know muscles existed. But beneath the soreness was something else — a warm, quiet pride. I hadn't run fast. I hadn't shocked the Academy. But I hadn't broken. A few course-mates hobbled in and out of their rooms, each carrying his own version of triumph or tragedy. Someone joked that he had seen his entire family tree on Rape Hill. Another claimed he had run so slowly at one point that ants were overtaking him. Within minutes, the morning's agony

began to transform into shared laughter — as only agony can in NDA.

When I finally lay down, staring at the ceiling, breath steady, legs throbbing gently, I realised something important. This run — this morning — was not just another training session. It was the beginning of my life as a runner. Not a fast runner. Not an elite runner. But a stubborn one. A runner who shows up, who keeps going, even when collapsing, seems like the more intelligent option. Years later, in marathons across different cities and even in ultras that tested the limits of common sense, I would think back to Glider Dome. To the open field where confidence lies. To the hill that steals your soul. To the plateau that deceives you. To the sloping road that interrogates your character. To the moment the Dome appeared in the distance like salvation. Every run after that — every finish and every failure I clawed my way across — had a bit of Novices' Cross Country in it. It was the day I discovered that ordinary runners can carry extraordinary endurance.

“I didn't know it then, but this run was only the prologue. The Academy had many more tests waiting, and running would follow me through all of them — sometimes as a tormentor, sometimes as a friend, sometimes as the only thing that made sense. The days after the novices' run would quietly transform me in ways I did not yet understand... and that is where this story goes next.”

CHAPTER 4

The Run Didn't End that Day

“Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory.” - William Barclay

By the time the soreness from the novices' run began to fade, the Academy had already moved on. Classes resumed with their usual indifference. Drill continued as though nothing noteworthy had occurred. Seniors shouted. Instructors taught. The routine rolled forward with mechanical certainty. No one asked how the novices' run had gone, and no one seemed particularly interested in the fact that the first-term cadets had, at Sunday dawn, discovered a new vocabulary of pain. At NDA, endurance was not something to be celebrated. It was something to be assumed.

My body, however, was still negotiating terms. The morning after the run, I discovered that standing up was best done slowly. Sitting down required calculation. Stairs, previously neutral structures, had developed hostile intent. Somewhere during those first few days, the pain stopped being sharp and alarming and settled into something dull and omnipresent. It was no longer asking for attention. It had moved in quietly, rearranged the furniture, and decided to stay. And yet, beneath that discomfort, something else had shifted.

Running no longer frightened me. I still didn't enjoy it. I was still slow. But distance had lost its authority. At least to some extent. The question: Can I do this? had quietly been replaced by How long will this take? It was a subtle change, but it altered

everything. The Academy hadn't noticed it. No one needed to. It was internal, and that made it more durable. The first term passed in a blur, and we headed home for our well-earned vacations. During those four weeks of vacation at Bokaro, I regularly ran. Yes, even during vacations. It felt good to cover longer distances. I had gotten comfortable with the idea of running. Not at a blinding pace, but I did run.

The second term arrived with fewer explanations and higher expectations. The novelty of being a first-termer had worn off. The Academy assumed we now understood what was required of us, and it was largely correct. Running was no longer introduced or discussed. It simply existed, woven into the day like drill, inspections, and shouted instructions. There were no whistles announcing anything special, no finish lines waiting to reward effort. Running had become part of the background hum of Academy life.

It was around this time that Camp Green Horn began to feature in conversations. The way it was described was almost comforting. Introductory Camp. Small route marches. Basic field exposure. Nothing fancy. Someone inevitably added, "It's mostly walking". That sentence alone should have been treated with suspicion. By now, we should have known that anything at NDA described as "just" something rarely was.

As with other things, we had senior cadets assigned to guide and help us prepare. This included making our packs, arranging our kit, pitching bivouacs, route marches, weapon training, firing, obstacle course, night navigation, and myriad other activities. We were informed that, as preparation for Green Horn, there would be an overnight exercise. It would be conducted under the supervision of our Divisional Officer — the same officer who had earlier counselled me and convinced me to stay at NDA. He was a man of few words and many pauses; someone whose silence often carried more meaning than a lecture. His humour, when it

appeared, was dry and understated, usually a few seconds after you realised you had misunderstood him.

The overnight exercise was meant to “give us an idea” of what to expect. It did much more than that. We assembled with our packs and drew our weapons in the afternoon, optimistic in the way only the unprepared can be. The Divisional Officer looked us over slowly, taking in our neatly arranged equipment and hopeful expressions. After a long pause, he said, “Good. You all look very confident. That will change.” It was not a threat. It was a statement of fact.

We set off at a decent pace. The seniors had ensured that the faster guys were in the first row to set a steady pace. The pack and weapon felt manageable at first. Heavy, yes, but not unreasonable. Boots were stiff but new. Conversation flowed. There was a sense of occasion, even mild excitement. An overnight exercise felt adventurous in theory. Fatigue, however, is not impressed by theory. As hours passed, the weight of the pack began to make itself felt. The straps dug into the shoulders. Every adjustment offered temporary relief, only to be followed by renewed pressure in a slightly different place. The march settled into a steady, unhurried pace that offered no mercy. Not fast enough to finish quickly. Not slow enough to be comfortable. The Divisional Officer and the assigned seniors walked or jogged with us, observing quietly. Occasionally, he would stop, look at someone adjusting their pack for the fifth time, and say, “Even if you keep doing that, it will still be heavy.” At another point, when someone asked how much farther we had to go, he replied, “Far enough for you to stop asking.” His humour was never loud, but it landed with precision.

After a planned circuitous route, we arrived at the designated campsite. The arrival was followed by preparing the camp area, setting up perimeter security, pitching tents, cooking food, and getting briefed, among other tasks. Night fell fully by the time we

were done. Sleep, if it can be called that, came in fragments. The ground was harder than expected. The air was colder. The body, already tired, refused to settle. When morning finally arrived, it felt less like rest had occurred and more like time had simply passed. That overnight exercise did not break anyone. But it stripped away illusion. It taught us something important before Camp Green Horn even began: endurance was not about heroic effort. It was about tolerating discomfort without making it dramatic.

Camp Green Horn followed soon after. Preparation felt different this time. Packs were packed with less enthusiasm and more resignation. No one joked about weight anymore. We lifted them, felt the familiar pull, and moved on. Acceptance had replaced complaint.

The camp unfolded in long days, wakeful nights, and longer marches. Boots replaced running shoes. Speed quietly exited the vocabulary. Movement became deliberate, methodical, unrelenting. Route marches dominated the experience. They were not remarkable for distance or terrain, but relentless in their persistence. The pack pressed down continuously, altering posture, compressing shoulders, reminding you at every step that it was there. Feet ached in new ways. Knees complained softly, almost politely. The body adapted by learning economy — how to move with less waste, how to stop arguing with the inevitable.

Time behaved differently on those marches. Kilometres lost meaning. Pace ceased to matter. Progress was measured by bends in the road, by landmarks that appeared and vanished, by the quiet promise of the next halt. The mind narrowed to a single instruction: keep moving. What struck me was how familiar the internal dialogue felt. The same negotiation that surfaced during long runs returned here, too, only slower and heavier. The body protested. The mind tried to bargain. The answer remained

unchanged. One step at a time. No surges. No collapse. Just motion.

Camp life offered little relief. Sleep was brief and unsatisfying. Fatigue accumulated rather than resolved. Meals were functional, eaten without ceremony. Hygiene was basic, almost symbolic. Days blurred into one another, marked less by events than by how tired you felt when they ended. Somewhere during one particularly long march, a quiet realisation surfaced. This wasn't training for fitness. It wasn't even training for toughness, at least not in the way I had understood it before. This was training for acceptance. Acceptance of discomfort. Acceptance of monotony. Acceptance of effort without immediate reward. Running, in comparison, suddenly felt generous. At least while running, the weight is your own. Here, the burden was external and unavoidable. Pace was dictated. Freedom was limited. Yet the requirement remained unchanged: continue.

By the time Camp Green Horn ended, there was no sense of triumph. There were stories, yes, but no moments of individual brilliance. Success and failure belonged to the group, not to any one person. As a course, we had given a decent account of ourselves, and in those four days, we learned more than we could easily articulate. What we carried back was not pride, but familiarity — a deeper understanding of fatigue that no longer demanded attention. The kind of tiredness that simply exists.

Back at the Academy, routine resumed seamlessly. Soon, Camp Green Horn was forgotten. The humdrum of other activities had taken over. But something had settled into place for me. Running had expanded its meaning. It had become more than running. It was no longer just about shoes and roads. It had become a way of understanding endurance itself — slow, heavy, unglamorous, and persistent.

The run hadn't ended that day at Glider Dome. It hadn't ended with the novices' run. And it certainly hadn't ended at Camp Green Horn. It had simply taken a different form. And it was quietly preparing me for what came next.

CHAPTER 5

It Began to Make Sense

“What we do repeatedly, we become.” - Aristotle

During the mid-term break of the third term, when most cadets were visiting Pune, five of us went for a morning trail run up Karpa Dongar. That was our idea of fun. It also saved us the trouble of explaining to anyone why we hadn't gone anywhere. We were cheerful enough through most of it. There was the usual noise — half-serious complaints, exaggerated suffering, conversations that went nowhere and didn't need to. But there were patches during the climb when I tuned all that out. I wasn't thinking of anything in particular. I could only hear my breathing. In. Out. Steady. For brief moments, that seemed to be enough. The run didn't demand heroics. It asked only that you keep moving. We ran, turned around, and came back. No sense of achievement. No story worth telling. After the run, I felt good. Time well spent. It was unforced. I had done something I liked, which, at the Academy, was reason enough.

Running, of course, was rarely optional at NDA. There were enough occasions when it was enforced and had to be done, whether you were in the mood or not. By the third term, you were senior enough to have some latitude. Not freedom — just a little room to decide how you spent what little time you had. Time was always a luxury at the Academy. It didn't suddenly appear with seniority — you just became better at stealing it without getting noticed. By then, I was reasonably settled. PT wasn't a problem. I could clear the basic tests for myself and even push for higher grades and achieve them because the squadron

needed points. Nothing spectacular, but dependable enough to avoid uncomfortable conversations. Weight was not an issue either. I wasn't struggling, and I wasn't standing out. I occupied a comfortable middle ground, which suited me just fine.

That term, I was selected for boxing to represent the Squadron in the U-48 category. I think it was mostly because of my weight, which was around 48 kg at the time (at that weight, even my self-esteem qualified as lightweight). Sigh!!! And also, I think the Boxing Captain didn't really have a choice. I say so because I wasn't a boxer. I had no boxing accomplishments. I didn't have the build or the instincts for it, and I certainly didn't have any background. I vividly remember the selection process. We were standing near the pull-up bars doing PT under the supervision of a senior, and our Boxing Captain walked up. In his booming voice, he asked, "Which one of you tikkis (third-termers) is under 48 kg?" No one stepped forward. His next question was, "How many of you are around 50 kg?" I stepped forward. Lo and behold, I was selected to represent the Squadron.

At the Academy, things don't always arrive because you want them. Sometimes they arrive because the numbers need to work out. Mine did.

Training began the way most things at NDA do. With running. At the Academy, everything starts with running. Warm-ups, conditioning, recovery — they all circle back to it. Boxing training was no different. The sessions were hard, repetitive, and largely unglamorous. Running sat quietly around them, before and after, holding the whole thing together. I had to keep my weight below forty-eight kilos. That meant shedding a little and making sure it stayed there. There were no clever tricks involved. The most reliable solution was also the least imaginative. I ran.

Before that, there was cross-country. How can I forget that? Cross-country was scheduled for the fourth Sunday of the first month of the term. Boxing was due to commence the week after. So, preparation for both happened in parallel. Not because I planned it that way, but because that's how things tend to pile up at NDA — one demand leaning casually on another. The days began to feel heavier. Not overwhelming — just full. Running stopped being an isolated activity. It slipped into the spaces between everything else. Early, when possible. Late, when necessary. Sometimes alone, sometimes with others. Often without much discussion. It was tough. But manageable. There wasn't much time to reflect on whether any of this was enjoyable or worthwhile. The Academy doesn't pause for introspection. You adjust, or you fall behind. You do what's required, then a little more, and you move on.

What surprised me was not the workload but how familiar running had become. It no longer needed motivation or planning. If there was weight to manage, you ran. If there was conditioning to improve, you ran. If the head felt cluttered, you ran. It wasn't dramatic. It was efficient. I didn't think of it as discipline or passion. It certainly didn't feel like preparation for anything beyond the immediate. It was simply the most dependable way I knew to keep things in order.

Academics, at this point, were still something I was content to get through rather than excel at. Clearing exams felt adequate, and for most of the time, that was good enough for me. Third-term mathematics, however, had a way of pushing back. The syllabus was tough enough to make complacency uncomfortable. Not enough to force an immediate change, but enough to signal that drifting through without effort would not work forever. For the moment, clearing still felt like success. Serious application would come later. Nothing about this phase demanded attention. There were no standout moments, no performances worth

recording. Just weeks that stacked up quietly, each carrying a little more weight than the last.

By the end of that term, nothing felt extraordinary anymore — and that, strangely, felt like progress. Running had stopped being a test. It had stopped being a punishment. It had even stopped being something I thought about too much. It was simply there, folded into the rhythm of days that began early and ended tired. I was not the fastest. I was not the strongest. I was not the one people noticed. But somewhere between boxing drills, academic routines, and long, uncelebrated runs, I had stopped resisting the Academy and started belonging to it. I didn't know it then, but this quiet acceptance — of effort, of discomfort, of being ordinary — was shaping me more than any single achievement ever could. The Academy still had more to demand. And running, it turned out, was only getting started.

CHAPTER 6

Running Without Being Told to

“Freedom is not the absence of commitment, but the ability to choose what binds you.”

- Jean-Paul Sartre

By the time the fourth term arrived, something fundamental had shifted within me. The Academy no longer felt like a storm I was trying to survive. It felt like weather I understood. The shouting, the early mornings, the physical grind — all of it continued, but it no longer demanded emotional energy. I had stopped bracing myself for the day. Routine had moved from being imposed to being internalised, and that made all the difference.

Running reflected this change most clearly. It was no longer something I prepared for. There was no anticipation, no dread, no mental rehearsal. It existed quietly, folded into the day. Even when the term ended and the Academy loosened its hold, running did not disappear. During term breaks, back home or away from parade grounds and schedules, I found myself lacing up my shoes without ceremony. There was no one watching. No one recording timings. And yet, I ran. My family got used to my running, but a few of the nosy neighbours didn't. “Kyun daudte ho chutti mein?” (Why do you run during the vacations?) I remember the incredulous looks when I replied, “kyunki mujhe accha lagta hai” (because I like doing it). I couldn't help it. Stopping would have felt unnatural.

Camp Rovers was the defining activity of the fourth term, retaining the same skeletal structure as Green Horn but stripped of novelty and mercy. It was harder in every practical sense — longer marches, deeper fatigue, higher expectations. But psychologically, it no longer felt like an initiation. The body had learned what to do. The mind had learned not to protest. Discomfort arrived, settled in, and was tolerated. That, I realised, was progress. Boxing remained part of my framework, not because of any burning ambition or because I excelled at it, but because arithmetic demanded it. I was still light, and weight categories needed to be filled. There was nothing romantic about it. Boxing was sharp, immediate, and unforgiving. Running helped — not in making me faster, but in helping me recover, reset, and show up again the next day. Boxing, on the other hand, was quick to humble me. It taught me that endurance cannot compensate for everything and that some limits are not negotiable. It also taught me a strange lesson in balance: running gave me space; boxing took it away. Between the two, I learned restraint.

By the fifth term, cross-country had lost its mythology entirely. There was no inner drama, no narrative of survival. I ran because I was expected to, and I ran competently. That was all. The absence of anxiety was perhaps the clearest marker of change. Running had stopped being a test of identity. It had become a tool — dependable, familiar, quietly effective.

Then came the sixth term, and with it a sense of elevation that is difficult to describe to anyone who has not lived inside a hierarchy for years. We were now the senior-most course in the Academy. The very corridors that had once intimidated us felt different underfoot. The same parade grounds, the same routine — but our posture had changed. Responsibility sat differently on our shoulders. The Academy that had once demanded

obedience now expected leadership. It was a heady transition, and we felt it in every small interaction.

Camp Trishul arrived not as a trial but as a culmination. It was demanding, yes — tougher than what had come before — but it felt like a final examination rather than a punishment. The body responded with quiet competence. The mind stayed composed. This was no longer about proving anything. It was about demonstrating what had already been absorbed. Academically, things aligned as well. The discipline that governed physical training found its way into study. Effort now had direction. Focus came more easily. The results reflected that, but more importantly, so did the confidence.

Graduation approached slowly, then all at once. The last days at NDA held a strange duality — a desire to leave and a reluctance to let go. The uniform that had once felt foreign now felt earned. The routines that had once exhausted now felt grounding. On the day of graduation, standing there as the senior-most cadet, the emotion was overwhelming in a way no training could prepare you for. It was pride, relief, disbelief, gratitude — all compressed into a single moment. There is no adequate way to describe what it feels like to walk out of the Academy for the last time. The gates do not change. The buildings remain. But you do. You leave with a body that understands effort, a mind that understands structure, and a quiet certainty that you can endure more than you once believed.

If NDA was where discipline was forged, what followed was where it would be tested. The year after NDA brought my first real taste of life at sea — and with it, an entirely new universe. The uniform changed first. The khakis of the Academy gave way to naval whites, crisp and unfamiliar. Wearing them felt like stepping into a different identity, a transition from a land lubber to a sea cadet. It was like going back to the first term at NDA. Only the environment was different. And then there was the sea.

The first time you step onto a ship, the world tilts — literally and otherwise. The horizon refuses to stay still. The deck moves under your feet like a living thing. Sunrises at sea are unlike anything on land — slow, expansive, almost ceremonial. Sunsets feel theatrical. Nights are vast and humbling, stitched together by stars you didn't know existed. The romance, however, lasted exactly as long as my stomach allowed. I was terribly seasick in those initial days. Gloriously, hopelessly seasick. The sea, unimpressed by my Academy conditioning, made its opinion clear. Running endurance did nothing to help here. This was a different negotiation altogether — one involving nausea, humility, and a newfound respect for gravity. Training officers, of course, were merciless in their encouragement. "When you were in liquid form," one of them informed me calmly, "I was already in uniform." It was delivered without malice, which somehow made it worse.

The pressure to learn the naval way of life was relentless. Terminology, systems, responsibilities — everything demanded attention. There was much unlearning before we learnt the navy way of life. There was little room for error, and even less patience for excuses. Days were long. Sleep was irregular. The body was adjusting again, this time not to physical hardship but to constant motion and responsibility. And yet, running survived. In the early months, it existed within regulation — scheduled, supervised, contained. Later, as routines loosened and life at sea took on a rhythm of its own, running became entirely self-regulated. There were no parade grounds now. No instructors. No Glider Dome. No cross-country competitions. No one cared whether I ran or not. And still, I ran! Not for fitness. Not for achievement. But because running had become how I made sense of change. By the time I was commissioned into the Indian Navy on 1 July 1998, running no longer belonged to any institution. It was no longer a requirement, a test, or a habit imposed from outside. It

was mine. No whistles. No formations. No one telling me what to do. Just a choice I kept making.

Part 1 of my story ends there — at the moment when structure gives way to responsibility and endurance becomes personal. What followed would stretch that choice in ways I could not yet imagine. And, as it turned out, running was only just getting started.

PART-2

CHAPTER 7

Running for No Reason

“The journey is the thing.” - Homer

For a while after commissioning, life felt almost irresponsibly open. There was structure, certainly — professional courses, academic pressure, constant movement from one place to another — but there was also an unexpected amount of space between obligations. We were no longer cadets living under a magnifying glass. We were commissioned officers, still in training, trusted to manage ourselves and expected to deliver without being supervised every waking minute. It was a subtle shift, but a powerful one.

My batch moved often during this period. New classrooms, new messes, new cities — routines barely had time to settle before they were dismantled and rebuilt elsewhere. The academic load was heavy, the pace relentless, yet I thrived. I did fairly well in these courses, not out of any dramatic need to prove myself, but because effort now felt organised. The discipline that had once been enforced externally had quietly taken root inside.

And somewhere inside that busy, demanding life, running slipped in — not as a plan or training, but as an impulse. It didn't announce itself or demand scheduling. It simply appeared when the day felt incomplete. One just felt like hitting the roads and building mileage. A pre-breakfast long run because the morning felt too empty to be wasted. A run that began without intention and ended at a railway station, for a cup of tea, because it was a famous tea stall. There was no logic to it and no goal worth explaining to anyone else. If someone had asked what I was

training for, the honest answer would have been: nothing. Long runs became strangely normal during this period. Ten, sometimes fifteen kilometres — not as milestones or achievements, but as distances that happened naturally when you kept going. I didn't think of them as "long."

They were just how far the run went before it decided to end. There were no watches dictating pace, no mental calculations, no concern about recovery. All you needed was a willing partner, or sometimes just a willing mind and body. Running hadn't yet learned to ask questions. Weekends were where the whimsy really surfaced. Some runs had destinations, but none had purposes that would survive serious scrutiny. A long run to a tourist spot because there was roasted corn to be eaten there. A run to a hill stop because it offered the best sunset views. Another because it was a place people gathered — and where people gathered, girls tended to appear, especially on weekends. That, at that age, felt reason enough. Running gave me the illusion of legitimacy. I could loiter without loitering, observe without being idle, eat corn without guilt.

These were not heroic runs. They were slightly mischievous, maybe unnecessary, and deeply enjoyable. The remarkable thing was that none of this came at the cost of responsibility. I attended courses, studied, and performed well. Life moved quickly, yet it remained under control. Running didn't feel like rebellion against discipline; it felt like balance. It softened the seriousness that uniform life can quietly impose if you let it. Looking back, this was the period when my baseline was set — though I didn't know it then.

Running was no longer about survival, as it had been in the Academy. It wasn't about proving endurance or measuring progress. It was simply part of how I existed in the world. If I had a free hour, I would run. If I felt restless, I ran. If a day ended without running, it felt oddly unfinished. I still didn't think of

myself as a runner; the label felt unnecessary. But my behaviour told a different story. Running had become the default, not a decision. The body was cooperative at this stage. It absorbed distance without complaint. Fatigue arrived politely and left without protest. There were no negotiations yet, no warning signs demanding attention. Running asked for nothing and, in return, gave a sense of lightness that is hard to explain until it disappears. This ease would not last. I know that now. But at the time, it felt abundant, almost casual — like something that would always be available if I wanted it.

Eventually, the constant movement of courses and classrooms gave way to something more permanent. I reported to a ship for my first assignment after completing various phases of training, stepping into a world that felt entirely different from anything I had known. The burden of expectation was immense. The rhythm changed immediately. Days were now shaped by watches, machinery, and the sea itself. There was a seriousness to ship life that had nothing to do with parade grounds or academic timetables. Running adjusted quietly, as it always did. It found space along the jetty, on unfamiliar stretches of road near the port, sometimes looping back to the ship from where it had begun. There was still no ambition attached to it. Running simply continued, indifferent to uniform changes and new routines.

It was during this period that I first had a brush with the world of naval diving. One day, a diving operation was scheduled onboard, and I happened to be the trainee officer on duty. I was asked to monitor the dive — a responsibility I accepted without realising it would leave a deeper impression than most duties. I watched the divers prepare with a calm efficiency that felt different from the urgency I was used to elsewhere. There was no wasted movement, no visible anxiety. When they slipped into the water, it was almost unremarkable — and that, somehow,

made it remarkable. After the dive, while the equipment was being stowed, I continued to watch them, fascinated, probably because I was a weak swimmer. I struck up a conversation with them, and it was then that one of the divers told me casually, “Saab, agar kabhi mauka mile to diving zaroor karna. Sabke bas ki baat nahin hai.” (Sir, if you ever get an opportunity, please become a navy diver. It’s not everyone’s cup of tea.)

There was no drama in the way he said it, no sales pitch — just a statement, offered and forgotten. But I didn’t forget it. What stayed with me just as strongly was the sight of my Commanding Officer — himself a diver — wearing the diving badge on his uniform. It wasn’t ostentatious, but once you noticed it, it carried weight. It spoke of a different kind of competence, one that didn’t need an announcement. I was quietly impressed — more than I realised at the time. Life moved on, as it does, and running continued to occupy its familiar, uncomplicated space. I didn’t connect it to diving yet, and I didn’t need to. The idea lingered in the background, unlabelled and unexamined.

Then, sometime in 1999, another nudge arrived — this one far less subtle. A senior officer, himself a qualified navy diver, watched me return from yet another run and asked casually, “Tum itna daudte ho (You run so much), why don’t you go for the diving course?” I laughed it off instinctively. “Sir,” I said, “I am a very weak swimmer.” He didn’t hesitate. “To become a diver, you don’t have to be a top-notch swimmer,” he replied. “You just need to be comfortable in water. You need to be able to float.” Then he paused, looked at me, and added, almost as an afterthought, “Waise bhi, floating mein kya mushkil hai? (Either way, what is so difficult about floating?) Even shit floats on water. I’m sure you’re much better.”

It was impossible not to laugh, but the comment landed harder than he probably intended. For the first time, the idea

stopped being abstract. It was no longer about admiration or curiosity; it became a question — uncomfortable, slightly provocative, and impossible to dismiss entirely. Running, meanwhile, remained unchanged. But somewhere between those long, purposeless runs and the deck of that ship, the thought took root. I didn't know it yet, but running — carefree, unexamined, and entirely my own — had been laying the groundwork for a different kind of endurance.

CHAPTER 8

Learning to Breathe Underwater

“You don’t rise to the level of your expectations. You fall to the level of your training.” - Archilochus

The idea of the Navy Diver course did not arrive with urgency. It did not demand attention or announce itself as destiny. It was a lingering thought, resurfacing at odd moments, usually when I was alone, usually when the body was tired and the mind quiet enough to listen. I had heard about the course before, of course. Everyone had. Stories circulated as they always do in uniformed life — selectively, exaggeratedly, stripped of context. Some spoke of it with pride, others with a shrug, and a few with an unmistakable tightness around the eyes that suggested unfinished business. I listened without asking questions. At that point, I wasn’t collecting information. I was collecting impressions.

Running continued, unchanged on the surface. It still began early, unfolded quietly, and belonged entirely to me. But beneath the rhythm of footfalls, something had shifted. Runs were no longer just responses to restlessness or habit. They began to feel preparatory, as if the body were being conditioned not for distance alone, but for something more defined — something that required steadiness rather than speed. I did not tell myself I was training for diving. That would have felt premature, even arrogant. Instead, I let running become more deliberate without explaining why. Distances stretched naturally. Pace remained unimportant. What mattered was duration, repetition, the act of showing up again and again.

Swimming entered my life reluctantly. I had never thought of myself as a swimmer. I was comfortable in water, yes — comfortable enough not to panic, comfortable enough to manage. But comfort, I was learning, was a flimsy foundation once discipline arrived. Swimming demanded obedience in a way running never had. There was no disguising inefficiency, no coasting through weak moments. Breath, which running allowed me to negotiate gently, became immediate and absolute. The first few sessions were sobering. Nothing went wrong exactly. I did not fail spectacularly. I did not embarrass myself. But I felt exposed in a way that running had never made me feel. In water, effort did not translate cleanly into progress. Small mistakes compounded quickly. The body, which I trusted implicitly on land, felt less reliable when suspended.

Still, I returned. Days began to stretch and compress in unfamiliar patterns. A run would lead into a swim. Sometimes the order reversed. On certain mornings, fins were stuffed into a rucksack and carried on a long run to the pool, only to be used before the run back. It was inefficient, faintly absurd, yet deeply satisfying. I liked that it didn't make sense. Those runs were different. Heavier. Less playful. There was still joy in movement, but it was quieter now, layered beneath attention and effort. Running was no longer a release from discipline; it had become part of it.

Life narrowed. Social engagements fell away without resistance. Weekends lost their looseness. Recovery became intentional. Everything that did not serve running or swimming felt optional, even indulgent. I did not experience this as a sacrifice. It felt like alignment, as though the excess of life was being trimmed away, leaving only what could bear weight. There were moments, usually late at night, when doubt surfaced. Was this necessary? Was I overcommitting to an idea that might never materialise? Was I mistaking endurance for readiness? The

questions arrived quietly and left without answers. I did not engage with them. I simply showed up the next morning and ran. Running had taught me one thing very well: questions do not need answers in advance.

In the meantime, directives seeking volunteers arrived, and I duly volunteered. As the date of reporting to Diving School drew closer, fatigue settled into the body in a way that felt earned rather than alarming. Muscles adapted. Lungs learned restraint. Swimming remained demanding, but no longer alien. The water had not become friendly, but it had stopped feeling hostile. There was still no certainty. I had not told myself I would succeed. I had not imagined wearing a badge or belonging to a fraternity. The idea of failure hovered close enough to be acknowledged, but not so close as to paralyse. What troubled me more was not failing the course, but the thought of walking away — of having to decide somewhere along the journey that this was too much. That would be harder to live with.

There was no countdown, no ritual planned to mark the commencement of the course. One morning looked much like the next. The only difference was a growing awareness that this phase — the preparation, the narrowing, the private negotiations — was coming to an end. Whatever came next would no longer be private. On the morning, I was due to travel to Diving School, I ran as usual. Nothing special. No symbolic distance. No attempt to mark the moment. I ran because that was what I did in the mornings. The body moved easily, obediently, unaware that its relationship with endurance was about to be renegotiated entirely. At the end of the run, standing still and breathing evenly, I felt neither excitement nor dread. Only a readiness of a very modest kind. The kind that comes not from confidence, but from repetition.

I reported for the course with seven other officers. The first obstacle to be negotiated was the screening phase. This phase lasted

two weeks, but it felt longer. Not because the days were particularly dramatic, but because nothing about them was allowed to be casual. Everything counted. Every run, every swim, every recovery period was observed – sometimes openly, sometimes not at all. You never quite knew when you were being assessed, which meant you learned very quickly to assume you always were. PT tests were conducted twice a week. On paper, that didn't sound excessive. In practice, it meant that just as the body began to recover from one bout, it was summoned again and pushed back to the edge. There was no attempt to disguise this.

A thing about the Diving School prayer. Training always began with a prayer. A famous Hindi prayer was what we recited - “*Daya kar daan bhakti ka, humein parmatma dena (O! Benevolent Lord, please grant us the boon of obeisance)*”. I do not remember the complete prayer, but one sentence of it is clearly etched in my memory:

“*Hamaare dhyaan mein aao prabhu, aankhon mein bas jaao (O, Lord! Please come into our conscience and settle down into our eyes)*”. Mentally, I had amended the sentence to read as, “*Hamaare dhyaan mein aao prabhu, ghutne mein bas jaao (O, Lord! Please come into our conscience and settle down into our knees)*”. To me, strong knees mattered more than eyes during the training.

On the ground, the work was familiar in form but unfamiliar in intent. Running featured prominently. There was a structured part and an unstructured one. Both pace and endurance mattered. There was also something about intent and the display of it. How quickly you assembled? How you moved when tired? Whether your stride changed under fatigue? Whether you slowed only when told, or pre-emptively, on your own? I found myself consistently making the cut in ground activities. Not comfortably, not effortlessly – but reliably. That mattered more than I realised at the time. There was no visible praise for it. Just

a nod, sometimes nothing at all, and the next task announced without pause.

In the water, things were less predictable. Swimming was structured, repetitive, and deliberately exhausting. The distances were manageable on their own. It was the sequencing that did the damage. Swim hard, rest briefly, repeat. Then repeat again. And then again, just when the body had begun to hope the session was over. I made the cut there too — narrowly on some days, more comfortably on others. What surprised me was not the physical toll but the mental noise that accompanied it. The water demanded attention in a way running never had. There was no drifting. No switching off. Every length required presence.

Outside the formal tests, the instructors ensured that recovery remained theoretical. Extra workouts appeared without warning. An informal “warm-up” would quietly turn into something else entirely. A session that looked routine on the board would be extended just enough to force decisions. Not heroic decisions — small ones. Whether to keep form when tired? Whether to speak up or stay quiet? Whether to push on or begin conserving? This was the ragda — not as punishment, but as process. The instructors pushed us deliberately to the edge, and then just a little beyond. Not to break us, but to watch how we behaved when the margin disappeared. There was no shouting for effect, no theatrics. Just relentless expectation. If you slowed, it was noted. If you compensated, it was noted. If you helped someone else, that too was noted. What I realised slowly was that screening was not really about physical thresholds. It was about habits under pressure — and once that became clear, there was no way to unsee it.

After two weeks, the results were announced without ceremony. Four of us made the cut — including two more course mates. The moment registered quietly at first, almost cautiously. There was relief, certainly, but it was restrained. None of us said

much immediately. We had learned by then that celebrations in this environment were best kept brief and private. There were no declarations of victory. Just laughter that came easily for the first time in days. Food tasted better. Fatigue felt lighter. For a few hours, we let ourselves believe the hardest part was behind us. We were wrong, of course. But that evening, we celebrated anyway — not the achievement, but the permission to continue. And that was enough.

The days immediately after screening carried a strange, almost deceptive lightness. Making the cut did not feel like a triumph so much as a reprieve. We had been granted entry, not safety. The course had accepted us, but it had not yet fully revealed itself. Training resumed the very next monday, as if screening had merely been a warm-up. If there was any sense of easing off, it was carefully disguised. The schedule looked familiar, the tasks recognisable, but the intent had shifted. We were no longer being tested to see if we belonged. We were now being worked on — shaped, corrected, and, when required, gently and repeatedly broken down.

Mornings still began with prayer. By now, it had settled into a routine, but not into insignificance. Standing there, shoulders already tight, eyes half-open, I realised that prayer had quietly changed its role. Earlier, it had felt like preparation. Now, it felt like stabilisation. A way of reminding the mind to stay where the body already was. The water sessions grew denser. Swimming was no longer about covering distance or meeting times. It became about sequencing. One activity flowed into another with minimal pause. Fatigue was layered deliberately, almost methodically. Just when the body began to recognise a pattern, it was disrupted. The instructors were not interested in how fast we swam when fresh. They watched how we moved when tired, how our breathing changed, and how our eyes behaved.

One of the crucial requirements for a diver is the ability to float even with the diving set on. For me, it was never easy. I had not paid adequate attention to it while preparing, and I paid the price. I could float, but only technically. The body understood what it needed to do, but the margin was thin. Any lapse in attention brought back the same familiar sensation — the subtle sinking, the instinctive tightening, the beginning of panic. Floating demanded presence every single time. It did not reward confidence. It punished complacency. That was perhaps the most exhausting part. Some days, the body cooperated. On others, it resisted quietly, stubbornly. Those were the days when frustration crept in — not loudly, but persistently. I found myself watching others, comparing without meaning to. Who looked comfortable. Who looked strained. Who was being watched more closely.

The instructors noticed. Extra workouts appeared without warning. A session meant to end simply did not. Instructions were given calmly, almost conversationally, as the body crossed thresholds it hadn't anticipated. There was no shouting for effect, no performative anger. The instructors did not need to raise their voices. The work spoke for itself. What became clear was that they were less interested in strength than in response.

How quickly did you recover your breathing?

Did your movements become sloppy under fatigue?

Did irritation show on your face?

Did you look around for reassurance?

None of this was commented on openly. It was simply observed.

By now, running had receded to the periphery. It was to be done only as part of the schedule. Not because it was forbidden, but because the training activities had a momentum that left no

room for anything else. Endurance was still required, but it had been translated into another language. The road had been replaced by water. Distance by duration. Pace by breath. Yet the mental patterns remained. I recognised the same negotiations I had encountered on long runs — the urge to stop early, the temptation to conserve unnecessarily, the quiet voice suggesting that one small shortcut would not matter. Running had taught me how to listen to that voice without obeying it. That skill mattered now more than ever.

Fatigue accumulated differently. It was not the sharp exhaustion of a hard workout, but a dull, persistent heaviness that settled into the body and refused to leave. Sleep helped, but never fully. Each morning began slightly behind where the previous one had ended. There was no true reset. This was when doubt began to sharpen. Not dramatic doubt. Not panic. Just the persistent question: *How long can I keep this up?* The course offered no reassurance. There were no markers to suggest progress. Days blended into one another. Success was defined only by the absence of failure.

There were moments that could have found a place in the ‘Humour in Uniform’ section. Once, while we were still getting used to the sets, I wore the face mask incorrectly. As a result, when I dived, water rushed into my mouth along with air. A very disconcerting feeling when one is getting used to the underwater domain. I shot up like a bullet, broke the surface, and my instructor asked me, “Saab, kya hua?” (What happened, sir?) I replied, “Saab, mooh mein paani aa raha hai” (Saab, I have water entering my mouth). His reply had us all in splits - “Saab, paani mein ho to paani hi aayega, frooti (a commercial drink) to nahin aayegi” (Sir, since you are in water, that is what you will get. You can’t expect Frooti coming into your mouth).

Some mornings, it felt rote. Other mornings, it felt essential. I stopped asking for strength. I asked instead for steadiness — the

ability to do what was required without excess emotion. To not be overwhelmed by anticipation. To not look too far ahead. The body learned slowly. Movements became more economical. Breathing settled sooner after exertion. Panic, when it appeared, passed more quickly. These were not breakthroughs. They were adjustments — small, incremental, barely noticeable unless you paid attention. The presence of course mates was immensely helpful. We did not speak much about the training. There was no need to. Shared fatigue made conversation unnecessary. Help appeared without explanation. A hand offered. A look exchanged. No one pretended this was easy. No one pretended it was impossible either.

As the days passed, the upcoming sea dive began to occupy mental space. Not obsessively, not anxiously — but as a fixed point on the horizon. Everything seemed to orient itself around it. Training felt like preparation, even when it did not obviously resemble the task ahead. The body sensed escalation. We prepared under our instructors' guidance. The night before the sea dive, there was no ceremony. Equipment was checked. Instructions were given. The routine was familiar by now. Still, lying down to sleep, I was acutely aware of the quiet that had settled in. The kind that precedes something irreversible. There was no fear worth naming. Only the understanding that the next day would ask a different question altogether — one that could not be answered by effort alone.

The morning of the sea dive did not feel special in any obvious way. There was no spike of adrenaline, no dramatic heaviness in the air. If anything, the calm was unsettling. We had trained long enough to know that when something truly demanding was coming, the course did not announce it with noise. The routine unfolded as usual. We assembled. Equipment was checked. Instructions were repeated in the same even tone they had always been delivered in. No one raised their

voice. No one offered encouragement. The sea dive was treated like another task on the schedule, and that, more than anything else, made it feel heavier.

The sea was calm. That should have been comforting. Instead, it made everything feel exposed. Calm water leaves no excuses. No movement to hide behind. No distraction. Just depth, waiting. When my turn came, there was no hesitation. The entry was clean and familiar. The water closed over me without resistance. Almost immediately, the surface world began to recede — sound thinning, light changing, perspective narrowing. Descent in open water is deceptive. It feels controlled, almost gentle, until you become aware of how quickly the surface disappears.

Pressure announced itself steadily. Not painfully. Methodically. Each metre added weight the body could not ignore. Equalising became rhythmic, automatic. Breath slowed. Movements became economical. There was no room here for excess thought. At depth, the world felt contained. Thirty-five metres is not an abstract number when you are living inside it. Light was muted, filtered into shades rather than colours. The sense of space compressed. Sound behaved differently. The body became acutely aware of itself — every movement registered, every breath deliberate. Five minutes is not a long time on land. At depth, it stretched.

There was no panic, but no comfort either. The body held itself in a careful balance — not relaxed, not tense, just attentive. Thoughts did not wander far. They circled close, returning again and again to simple checks: breath, position, time. Running returned here, not as a memory of movement, but as a discipline of mind. I recognised the same internal rhythm that surfaced during long, solitary runs — the narrowing of focus, the refusal to project forward, the discipline of staying exactly where you were. There was no advantage in imagining the surface. There was only

the present moment and the next instruction. The weight of water pressed evenly. It was not hostile. It was indifferent. That distinction mattered. The sea did not challenge. It did not test. It simply existed. Any failure here would be entirely my own.

When the signal came to begin ascent, I felt as if I had been shaken out of my reverie. Rising through the water was slower than descent. The body adjusted gradually, patiently. There was no rush. No relief yet. Just the steady reversal of pressure, metre by metre, breath by breath. Breaking the surface was quieter than expected. There was no surge of emotion, no instinctive gasp. Just air returning to its usual place. Sound reasserted itself. The horizon reappeared, ordinary and unchanged. I floated there for a moment longer than necessary. Not because I was overwhelmed, but because I was aware — acutely, precisely — of having stayed. That was the only word that mattered. I had not rushed. I had not resisted. I had not panicked. I had stayed.

Back on deck, the routine resumed immediately. Equipment was taken. Instructions were given. The course did not pause to acknowledge what had just happened. That was its way. The dive was not a climax. It was a requirement. Later, as the day settled, fatigue arrived in a different form. Not exhaustion. Not elation. Something quieter. A heaviness mixed with clarity. The body felt used, but not depleted. The mind felt strangely still. There was no urge to replay the dive. No need to explain it to anyone. It existed now as experience, complete and self-contained. That evening, prayer returned one last time. This time, it felt like acknowledgment rather than request. There was nothing left to ask for. The course had posed its question. I had answered it in the only way available — by staying present long enough for the moment to pass. The sea did not offer approval. It did not need to.

The badge ceremony was not grand. There was no swelling music, no dramatic pause to let the moment announce itself.

Like most things on the course, it arrived with efficiency. We assembled, stood where we were told to, and waited. The setting was familiar by now — the same space where we had stood tired, anxious, unsure — but the atmosphere felt subtly altered. Not lighter. Just resolved. The instructors moved with their usual economy. Nothing about their manner suggested celebration. The course did not reward sentiment. It acknowledged completion and moved on. That restraint, oddly enough, made the moment heavier. When my name was called, I stepped forward without thinking. The badge was pinned with practiced hands. The touch was brief, almost perfunctory. There was no speech, just a congratulatory remark, no elaborate reminder of what it had taken to reach this point. The absence of commentary felt deliberate, as if the course trusted that anyone standing there already knew the cost.

As I stepped back into line, something unexpected happened. My eyes welled up. Not suddenly. Not dramatically. Just a quiet moisture that caught me by surprise. It was not pride that brought it on. It was recognition — of effort sustained without guarantee, of fear managed without display, of the simple fact that I had not walked away. I remembered the sailor who had spoken casually years earlier, almost in passing, suggesting that if the opportunity ever came, diving was worth doing. I remembered the badge on my Commanding Officer's uniform — understated, heavy with meaning once noticed. I remembered the senior officer who had dismissed my concerns about swimming with humour so blunt it had forced the idea back into my mind.

None of those moments had carried me through the course alone. Together, they formed a thread — a quiet encouragement that had never demanded anything, only suggested that staying might be possible. The ceremony ended quickly. There was no speech. No collective acknowledgement. The course simply moved on to the next task, the next instruction, the next routine.

That was its way. Achievement here was not a destination. It was a checkpoint.

We had a grand celebration later. Conversation flowed easily, now that effort had loosened its grip. Fatigue still sat in the body, but it no longer felt threatening. Each of us had lived the same days differently, and there was an unspoken understanding that some experiences were best left intact. Shared endurance does not always require shared narration. What I felt most strongly was not triumph, but steadiness. The body felt familiar again. Not invincible, not transformed — just trustworthy. The mind felt quieter. The persistent background noise of doubt had receded, not because it had been silenced, but because it had been answered. Later that evening, when I found myself alone, the weight of the moment settled more fully. I held the badge in my hand for a long time. It was smaller than I had imagined. Simple in design. Easy to overlook. And yet, it carried something dense — not achievement, but memory. Of mornings that began with prayer. Of floating that never became easy. Of days when returning felt harder than quitting.

Running drifted back into awareness then, almost uninvited. Not as distance, not as pace, not as training. Just as a familiar language of effort. Running had not prepared me for water, pressure, or depth. It had not taught me how to equalise or control buoyancy. But it had taught me how to return — after bad days, after quiet failures, after moments when the simplest choice would have been to stop showing up. That lesson had held. The course had not asked for brilliance. It had asked for presence. For steadiness. For the willingness to stay long enough for the moment to pass. Next morning, life resumed. There was no extended reflection. Uniforms were worn. Schedules were followed. The badge settled quietly into its place, just another part of what I carried forward. But something had shifted. Not dramatically. Not visibly. Just enough to matter. I felt like someone new. I felt like

someone who had stayed. And that, I knew now, would make all the difference in what came next.

By the time the diving course ended, the idea of becoming a Marine Commando was no longer a passing thought. It had stopped arriving as a question and begun settling in as a possibility — one that refused to leave quietly. It wasn't born out of bravado. If anything, it emerged from restraint. The course had taught me what limits felt like when they were real, not imagined. It had stripped away the romance from endurance and replaced it with something more honest: effort without applause, discipline without guarantees, progress measured only by the ability to return the next day. That lesson lingered. I noticed it in small ways at first. In how I watched experienced divers and commandos move — economical, deliberate, never hurried. In how I paid attention to those who seemed most comfortable with discomfort. In how the idea of doing more no longer felt like escalation but continuation. During the diving course, I had learned something essential about myself. I had learned that fear did not need to be conquered but had to be managed. That endurance was less about toughness and more about attention. That the body, when treated honestly, could be trusted again.

Running returned slowly. Not as training, not as ambition. Just as movement. But something in them had changed. The mind felt quieter. The familiar negotiations with fatigue sounded different now. Less dramatic. More practical. Somewhere in those runs, the idea of being a Marine Commando felt possible. I allowed the idea to sit beside me, unexamined but present. The way some thoughts do when they are not yet ready to be interrogated. There were moments when doubt surfaced. Was I chasing momentum? Was this curiosity mistaken for a calling? The questions arrived, as they always did, but they lacked urgency. The diving course had taught me that not every decision needed to be made immediately. Some ideas deserved time to

prove their staying power. This one did. The stories I heard now landed differently. The warnings no longer discouraged; they clarified. The reputation of the course — its brutality, its attrition — did not repel me. It focused me. It suggested continuity rather than rupture. I recognised the pattern. This was how running had begun. Not with a goal, but with repetition. Not with ambition, but with return.

The idea of becoming a Marine Commando had entered my life the same way — quietly, persistently, refusing to be dismissed. I did not yet know what it would cost. I only knew that the thought no longer frightened me. That was new. The diving course had not made me ready. But it had made me willing. And willingness, once established, did not stay contained. Somewhere between that and the steady rhythm of returning to the road, something else had begun to take shape — something that did not feel like ambition, and did not feel optional either. I did not yet know what it would demand. I only knew that it had stopped asking for permission.

CHAPTER 9

When Willingness was Not Enough

“A man’s courage is his ability to endure the consequences of his actions.” - John Steinbeck

By the time I returned to my ship after completing the diving course, the idea of becoming a Marine Commando had stopped feeling like a thought and begun to feel like a fact. It sat with me the way certain decisions do once they have crossed some invisible line — no longer tentative, no longer exploratory, simply present.

The officer who had first nudged me towards diving was pleased. He had tracked my progress quietly, and when we finally spoke, there was an ease in his manner that suggested shared satisfaction. During one such conversation, almost casually, I said it out loud. Marine Commando felt like the next logical step. I did not say it dramatically. There was no declaration, no attempt to persuade. It came out the way conclusions do when they have been lived with long enough to feel obvious. To me, it was simply a continuation — a further narrowing of the path I had already chosen.

The reaction was underwhelming. At first, no one took me seriously. There were smiles, raised eyebrows, and half-amused looks that suggested indulgence rather than concern. The assumption was obvious: I was high on the diving badge. Fresh from success. Temporarily intoxicated by accomplishment. “Let it pass,” the unspoken advice seemed to say. “Enjoy the moment. This phase will settle.” I noticed the dismissal more than I reacted to it. There was no anger, no defensiveness. Just a quiet

awareness that what felt settled inside me still sounded speculative to others. I learned quickly that being dismissed is sometimes lonelier than being opposed.

As word spread, conversations began to change in tone. Seniors started pulling me aside, some gently, some more firmly. These were not confrontations. They were counselling sessions, delivered with care and experience. They spoke of career trajectories, steady progress, and how well I was doing. They pointed out, reasonably, that I was on a good path. That I had momentum. That choosing the Commando route would interrupt all of that. “Why throw this away?” was the question that surfaced most often. It was never accusatory. It was practical. Sensible. The kind of advice that usually deserves to be followed. And for a moment — only a moment — it unsettled me. Not because it was wrong, but because it was persuasive. I listened. I nodded. I acknowledged the logic. And still, nothing shifted. The desire did not soften. It did not retreat. If anything, the resistance clarified it. I realised then that I was no longer trying to convince myself. I was simply refusing to talk myself out of something that had already taken root.

One senior, the same officer who had encouraged me to try diving in the first place, watched all of this quietly. When he finally spoke, it was not to dissuade me but to offer something else. A compromise. At the time, I thought it was a practical solution. Only later did I understand its deeper intent. He explained that there was a route available — a way to volunteer for Commando qualification without permanently burning bridges. A limited-term commitment. Five years of service with the unit. At the end of it, a choice: return to the regular Navy or pursue advanced qualification and stay on. It was presented plainly, without pressure. This way, he said, I wouldn’t block my future. This way, I could test the truth of my desire without erasing everything I had built.

I agreed. Not because it diluted what I wanted, but because it allowed me to want it honestly. It removed recklessness from the decision. It gave form to my intent. When the communication finally came asking for volunteers, one conversation remained. Permission from my Commanding Officer. I walked into his cabin prepared, but not rehearsed. I knew what I wanted. I did not know how he would react. I did not expect what followed. He went ballistic. Not with anger alone, but with something sharper — alarm. He spoke quickly, forcefully, words tumbling over one another. I was young, he said. Impetuous. I didn't understand what I was throwing away. I would regret this decision later. Careers were built patiently, not gambled on impulse.

He was not wrong. That was the problem. I listened, standing there, absorbing the weight of his authority and the sincerity of his concern. Then, when he paused, I surprised myself.

I didn't argue.

I didn't persuade.

I didn't soften my stance.

I said no. Not loudly. Not eloquently. Just firmly. Like a bull, stubborn and unmoving. This was the career I had chosen. This was the path I wanted to take. I needed to go. The room went quiet. Eventually, he relented. Not with approval. With consent. That distinction mattered.

As I left his cabin, the relief I expected did not come. Instead, I felt something heavier — the quiet understanding that from that point onward, responsibility lay entirely with me. No one could say I hadn't been warned. No one could say I hadn't been given alternatives. I had chosen. At the time, that felt like strength. I did not yet understand the cost of wanting something so badly. Once my Commanding Officer finally approved my

request to volunteer, I should have felt relief. Instead, I felt urgency. There was a strange heaviness that comes with getting what you insist on — not joy, but responsibility. The permission did not feel like a door opening. It felt like the floor disappearing under your feet. Until that moment, the dream had lived safely in the mind. Now it had entered paperwork. It had become real, official, and irreversible. And because it was now real, it could now be failed.

The course was scheduled to begin sometime in September 2001. I still had a few months to go. Enough time for doubt to visit repeatedly, and enough time for obsession to settle in. Those months were not dramatic. They were disciplined. Running increased — not in the carefree way it had been earlier, but in the purposeful way that comes when you have already told the world you are going to do something and now need to prove you weren't simply talking. Swimming continued. Workouts became tighter, less negotiable. Even rest began to feel like training. Every easy day carried guilt. Every hard day carried reassurance.

I didn't tell myself I was preparing because I wanted the Commando badge. I told myself I was preparing because I didn't want to disappoint myself. Both were true. The maroon beret became a symbol long before it became anything else. It wasn't just headgear. It was belonging. It was proof. It was the visible end-point of months of insistence, argument, and refusing to be laughed off. Somewhere in my mind, it began to represent not success but legitimacy — as if wearing it would finally silence the part of me that feared being ordinary.

When the date finally arrived, there was no ceremony to it. One day you are training in familiar surroundings, pretending to be prepared. The next day you are travelling toward something that has its own rules, its own language, its own idea of what "prepared" even means. We reached the MARCOS training centre on a Sunday afternoon. There were eight of us officers.

Along with us were eighty-odd sailors — eighty-nine, if memory serves me right. A huge crowd. The numbers alone carried weight. You don't gather that many men for comfort. You gather them when a system is designed to remove most of them. We reported, settled in, and waited. Sunday evening arrived quietly. The air had that half-rested feel that Sundays often carry, even in uniformed life — that thin illusion that maybe the worst begins tomorrow, not today. Then the instructors called us. They spoke in the tone of people who have done this too many times to be impressed by new faces. Calm. Unhurried. Almost polite. They said they would do some introduction, some loosening up, a small familiarisation. The kind of words that make you think you will end the evening tired but intact.

Then they introduced us to something called a mud walk. If the phrase sounds harmless, it is because you haven't done one. Mud walking is not walking. It is a negotiation. The mud was soft, slimy, and deep. The moment you stepped into it your feet sank immediately. Then your legs followed, as if the earth were calmly accepting you into itself. Within seconds, it was up to the waist. Every step demanded extraction. Every movement required force. The body fought not against forward resistance but against downward suction — an invisible hand pulling you back to the same place you were trying to leave.

We were told to walk perhaps five hundred metres. Maybe six hundred. On land, that distance is nothing. It's the kind of distance you cover absent-mindedly, without even counting. Here, it felt like a punishment designed by someone who had run out of creative ideas and decided to let the mud do the work instead. The first few steps were almost funny. There was disbelief. Confused laughter. The sort of humour that shows up when the mind cannot yet accept what the body is experiencing. People looked around at each other as if waiting for someone to announce it was a joke. But no one announced anything. The

instructors watched quietly. The mud remained indifferent. Then the humour thinned. Within minutes, the thighs burned. Hips protested. Breath became clumsy. The body, used to forward momentum, struggled with the absurdity of progress that felt like failure. For every step you gained, the mud seemed to demand payment. Shoes felt heavier. Clothes clung. The legs moved as if they belonged to someone else.

What shocked me wasn't just the fatigue. It was the way the body's confidence evaporated. Running gives you a sense of control. Even when you're suffering, you understand it. You know what it means. You can measure it, pace it, negotiate with it. This mud did not negotiate. It simply resisted. There was no rhythm to find, no stride to settle into. It was brute effort without elegance. Somehow, we finished it. Not gracefully. Not powerfully. Just... finished. We emerged coated and exhausted, looking at each other with the same expression: part disbelief, part dread, part reluctant respect. And that's when the thought arrived — not like fear, but like clarity. What have we gotten ourselves into? Because this had been Sunday evening. This had been presented as loosening up. This had been the introduction. A warm-up. A trailer. And if this was the trailer, then what was the film going to be?

As I stood there, mud clinging to places it had no business reaching, the maroon beret suddenly felt very far away. Not because I no longer wanted it, but because I realised something important. Wanting it would not be the hard part. Staying through whatever was coming next... that would be. Mercifully, the day ended with the mud walk. The instructors didn't add anything further, which, by their standards, counted as kindness. We were left alone to clean ourselves as best we could, eat whatever passed for dinner, and prepare for the next day. The word prepare felt laughably optimistic. It implied control. It implied knowledge. At that point, we had neither.

This course was meant to run for sixteen weeks, including a two-week screening phase, which made sense given the numbers. You don't gather eight officers and nearly ninety sailors and expect everyone to remain standing at the end. The screening wasn't just a filter. It was the first message: *not everyone will stay*.

The next morning, we mustered around six. The air still held the last traces of Sunday quiet, but the ground had already shed its mercy. Even before anything began, we noticed something odd — about fifteen men standing to one side, slightly apart from the rest of us. They weren't stretching. They weren't waiting for instructions. They were just... standing. Curiosity pulled a few of us towards them. "What happened?" someone asked. One of them replied simply, almost casually, "We are resigning. We're not doing this course." It took a moment for the sentence to register. Resigning. On Day One. After one mud walk. Coming from the diving school, I had my own definition of tough. Diving had demanded lungs, nerves, discipline. It had shaken me, humiliated me, rebuilt me. And yet, here we were — one session into a new course, and fifteen men had already decided they'd had enough. The shock wasn't judgemental. It was bewildering. If this was what one mud walk could do... what exactly was waiting for us over the next sixteen weeks?

The screening began in earnest, and any illusion of "settling in" vanished quickly. The training was relentless, not because it was random but because it was systematic. Six and a half days. Even Sundays were only half-days of relief, and that relief began only after lunch. Then you were expected to recover, reset, and return to the grind the next morning as though nothing had happened.

And every Monday, the instructors would act as if Sunday had been a vacation. On one such Monday — the second week, if I remember correctly — we were told, with straight faces, "Come on, guys... you had a break yesterday. It was an easy day."

Easy day. There is a special kind of humour in training establishments. It is not designed to make you laugh. It is designed to make you question your own perception of reality. I had experienced it at NDA. I thought I was familiar with it. This was a notch above that — familiar, but sharper. Like the same knife, just better sharpened.

What stood out was the constant running. Not the romantic, solitary running I associated with freedom. This was running with purpose, urgency, and punishment woven into it. You ran to classes. You ran from one place to another because walking was considered a luxury. You ran during PT. You ran sprints. You ran with weapons. You ran through obstacles. You ran with packs. Even when you weren't running, you were usually lifting something that made you wish you were only running. There was no "run session" in the schedule because the entire schedule was a run session.

Some days felt like a blur of movement: stop, start, sprint, fall in, fall out. If you paused to wonder what you were doing, you were already behind. The only small mercy — if it can be called that — was the swimming. Because I had completed the diving course and another officer with me was also a diver, we became useful in a very specific way. During swimming sessions, they needed someone to act as a lifeguard. So, we got pulled out, briefly, to be the responsible adults near the pool. It wasn't rest exactly, but compared to the rest of the day, it felt like a holiday. It was one of those strange moments when having suffered earlier gave you a small advantage now — not in performance, but in survival.

Weapon training was introduced soon enough. We would run to the firing range, then wait for our chance. When it wasn't your detail's turn to fire, you weren't resting. You were doing something else that demanded effort and discomfort — lifting a

course mate, carrying weight, running with an awkward load, repeating drills until your arms forgot what it meant to feel light.

It felt like being back at the Academy. Or perhaps more accurately, like being back at the Academy after someone had quietly removed all the parts meant to make you feel safe. Still, we kept going. Two weeks passed like this — not neatly, not heroically, but stubbornly. At the end of it, when the screening results were finally announced, it felt less like success and more like survival being acknowledged. Out of the initial crowd — eight officers and eighty-nine odd sailors — only four officers and thirty-one sailors were selected. Thirty-five in total.

I was in. The relief was immense. Not celebratory, not loud, but real. Everything I had endured over those two weeks suddenly felt justified. It was a step closer. Many steps still remained, but at least one threshold had been crossed. The instructors even declared that the rest of Saturday would be off. I remember thinking I would inform my ship and let myself relax. Let my hair down, metaphorically — because there was no hair to let down. We were all skinheads by then. The course had ensured that even vanity had been eliminated early, like an unnecessary accessory. Just before we dispersed, one instructor gathered the selected thirty-five to the side. He looked at us calmly, almost conversationally, and said words that stayed with me. “Ab dekh lena... ab hum log aapko nahi nikaalenge.” “Ab course se aap log khud nikloge. (You guys’ watch. From here on, it won’t be us removing you from the course. You will do it on your own accord.)”

I didn’t fully understand what he meant then. It sounded like a threat — not loud, not aggressive, but definite. Later, I realised it wasn’t a threat. It was a statement of how the course worked. From now on, they wouldn’t remove us. From now on, we would remove ourselves. Through injury. Through exhaustion. Through something inside giving up quietly. I stood there,

selected, relieved, exhausted... and suddenly less certain than I had been five minutes earlier. Because for the first time, it became clear: Passing screening didn't mean the course would get easier. It only meant the course had finally begun.

By the time we reached the Monday of the third week, something inside me had started counting. Two weeks done, I told myself. Fourteen more to go. It wasn't optimism. It was arithmetic — the kind you do when you're trying to make something unmanageable feel finite. It gave me a strange sense of control, like holding a calendar could somehow hold the suffering too.

One thing about MARCOS training became clear very early: it didn't just test your body; it tested your ego in a very specific way. Unlike diving school — where officers and sailors trained together for some things but were still largely separated — the MARCOS course treated everyone as one class. Officers, sailors, all of us together, under the same sun, the same sweat, the same instructions. And the most symbolic part of it was this: we did not wear ranks. Officers didn't wear them. Not once. It didn't feel like a sacrifice. It felt like a message. Here, you weren't "Sir" or "Saab". You were a trainee. You were the same as everyone else. And to the instructors, that wasn't just ideology — it was operational truth. A sailor could be your instructor. He could be the experienced professional teaching you skills you didn't possess. And in that space, rank didn't matter because survival didn't care about rank. In a strange way, it was liberating. And in another way, it was deeply uncomfortable — because you couldn't hide behind anything. Not rank, not polish, not seniority. Your competence was your only uniform.

The third week brought more of everything. More running. More weapon drills. More firing practice. More movement from one place to another at a pace that made walking feel like a crime. New weapons appeared. Different drills. Activities were

introduced steadily, as if the syllabus were slowly tightening its grip. Rappelling. Unarmed combat. Obstacles. Assault courses. Route marches.

A little bit of classroom instruction too — though “classroom” was often a cruel joke. We would sit down, exhausted, backs straight only because our muscles didn’t know how to relax anymore. Within minutes, one or two would slip into sleep. Not because we were careless — because the body took whatever rest it could steal. Some instructors seemed to take a special pleasure in this. “Oh... you guys are not interested in studying?” they would say, with a smile that had no warmth in it. And then, as punishment for being human, the class would be taken outside for PT. At this point, we stopped reacting. We took it stoically. What else could we do? This wasn’t a negotiation. The instructor didn’t ask what you preferred. He announced what would happen next. And in this course, next always meant effort.

The days had a rhythm that was almost brutal in its consistency. Training started early — around 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning. There were brief breaks for breakfast and lunch, but they were short enough to feel like interruptions. By the time we got back in the evening, it was close to dinner, around 8:30 at night, sometimes later. Till then, you were doing something — running, lifting, crawling, firing, marching, sweating, being shouted at, being tested, being made smaller so you could be rebuilt. And through all this, my body held. I was tired, obviously. Bruised. Burnt by the sun. Hands battered. Knuckles scraped. But the pain felt like part of the contract. I had signed up for this. I had fought for this. And I didn’t want to let myself down.

Then, somewhere around the fourth week, my body stopped behaving like an obedient partner. It happened during a rappelling session. I was coming down the rope, and I made a mistake — a small one, but small mistakes land loudly here. You’re supposed to apply the brake properly so you come down

with a controlled descent and a soft landing. I didn't. I landed hard. Not just hard — loud. A heavy thud that made even the ground feel offended. And in that instant, my knees took a shock they weren't prepared for. It wasn't the normal ache of training. It was sharp, immediate, almost insulting in its suddenness — like a slap. For a few seconds I stood still, pretending nothing had happened. That's what we do, isn't it? The first instinct is denial. Not because we are brave, but because we don't want the truth to arrive. I told myself it could be managed. Ice. Oil. A bit of massage. Crepe bandage. Painkillers, if needed. The usual negotiation tactics you use when your body complains in the middle of something you desperately want.

But the next morning, the body made itself very clear. I was limping. At first, the instructors didn't react much. I had been doing fine till then, so they gave me the kind of concession that isn't kindness — it's temporary tolerance. "No problem," they said. "You run slowly. You can come behind the class." Coming behind the class is still running. Still with fatigue. Still on hard ground. Still under time pressure. Still under eyes that notice everything. And the pain increased.

By the fifth week, it wasn't just discomfort. It was trauma. The kind that doesn't allow the mind to play brave anymore. Every step became a reminder. Every landing became a warning. And the most frightening part was this: pain no longer left after rest. It stayed. Sitting inside the joint like a permanent guest. Towards the end of the fifth week, I finally did what every stubborn man delays until the last moment. I went to the doctor. The doctor examined me and sent me for a specialist opinion. I went, got the tests done — X-rays, checks, whatever he felt was necessary. The specialist looked at my appearance before he looked at my reports. The skinhead haircut. The sunburnt face. The bruised hands. The knuckles that looked like they belonged to someone who fought walls for a living. He asked me, almost

gently, “Where are you training?” I told him. He looked back at me, and his tone changed. “Son,” he said, “let me be very frank with you. You can’t continue the course. Not in this state.”

I remember that moment with painful clarity — not because it was dramatic, but because it was so matter-of-fact. No sympathy, no padding. Just truth. He said the knee wasn’t broken, but it was very close. Any further damage, he warned, could become permanent. And then he added something that hit me harder than the injury itself. “You might even get kicked out of the Navy if you damage yourself permanently.” That sentence landed like a second thud — deeper than the first. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I tried to bargain immediately, like all desperate men do. I told him I had put in so much effort. That I had already completed five weeks. That I was into the sixth week. Somehow, dragging myself through. He didn’t change his expression. “Choice is yours,” he said. “I can only tell you that you should not continue. If you want to damage yourself permanently, you can. But then you will have to live with that.”

I walked out of the hospital with the kind of heartbreak that doesn’t announce itself loudly. It sits silently in your chest and makes everything feel hollow. I spoke to a few people — my true friends, the ones whose guidance I trusted. They all told me the same thing: it’s not the end of life, look at the bigger picture, it’s just a course. Easy for them to say. Not because they were wrong — but because they weren’t inside my body. They weren’t carrying my dream. They weren’t living with the weight of wanting something so badly that quitting felt like a personal failure.

But the truth didn’t change.

I returned and met my course officer — a genuinely good man. He was sympathetic, but sympathy is limited by rules. He told me he could give me at most two days off. That was the course policy. Beyond that, it wasn’t possible. Even as he said it,

he looked at how I was moving — limping, stiff, trying to pretend I was fine — and he said what both of us already knew. “You won’t be okay in two days.” At that point, choice stopped being mine. Not because I didn’t want to fight. I wanted to fight. I wanted to drag myself through, crawl if needed, do anything except give up. But this was not the kind of pain you could out-stubborn. It was the kind of pain that threatened to end more than a course.

And so, in the sixth week, I resigned. After months of preparation. After standing up to seniors. After surviving screening. After imagining the maroon beret as a destination. It ended without drama. A few lines of paperwork. A signature. A date. Clean, procedural, unemotional. It turns out that ending a dream does not require noise. Sometimes it only requires a pen. I stepped out of the office and stood there for a moment, unsure what to do next. The body was still in training mode. The course was still running around me. Men were still moving with purpose. Instructors were still shouting. Orders were still being obeyed. Only I had stopped belonging to it.

I went to the mess and packed my things. There was no care in it. No folding. No checking. Things were stuffed into the bag quickly, as if speed might prevent something from catching up. I avoided looking around. Familiar corners, routines, faces — all of it continued as if nothing had happened. The course had moved on. I had not. At some point, I found myself in the bar. I don’t remember deciding to go there. I drank quickly. Not for pleasure. Not for celebration. Just to quieten something that wouldn’t settle. There is a kind of drinking that isn’t about bravado or escape — it’s about erasure. I slept after that. How I got back, I don’t know. Whether someone helped me or whether I moved on by habit alone doesn’t matter. Sleep came heavy and unclear. The next morning, I left. No goodbyes.

No explanations. No handshakes. I didn't trust myself with any of those.

The journey back felt unreal. The knee hurt with every movement, but the body could manage it. The mind was less cooperative. It replayed scenes that had never happened — the beret, the life, the version of myself that had already been imagined and now had nowhere to go. When I reached the ship, the shock on faces was immediate. They weren't expecting me. After I had cleared screening, arrangements had already been made for my relief. In their minds, I had moved forward. The ship had adjusted to my absence. Now I stood there early, limping, sunburnt, exhausted — and visibly out of place.

I wasn't in a state to serve. Not physically. Not emotionally. The ship's routine, daily discipline, and professional demands required a mind that could be present. Mine wasn't. Mine was stuck in the course, in the rope, in the thud of the landing, in the doctor's words, in the resignation paper, in the maroon beret that I could still see clearly even though I had never worn it. My Commanding Officer saw it. He spoke to the HR people and had me transferred to a training establishment — a shore posting, a place where I could exist without being immediately operational. It was an administrative solution, but it felt like exile.

Those days were bad. Real bad. If I were to measure emotional low points the way we measure ocean depths, this would have been somewhere close to the Mariana Trench — a place where sunlight doesn't reach, where pressure is constant, where even your own thoughts feel heavy. My knee was injured, yes. But the injury was not the deepest wound. The deepest wound was the shattering of a dream I had already begun living in my head. I had imagined the life. The identity. The pride, not as arrogance but as belonging. I had thought about what it would mean to wear the beret, to stand among men who had earned it,

to feel that I had finally stepped into a version of myself that was no longer “almost.”

And now it was gone. Not gradually. Not gently. Just... gone. At night, I had nightmares. Not dreams. Nightmares. I would see someone snatching the maroon beret from my head — even though, in reality, it had never been on my head. I would feel hands tearing at my commando badge, stripping it off my chest like an accusation. In those moments, sleep wasn't rest. Sleep, a punishment. The mind doesn't accept failure easily. It keeps replaying what it thinks should have happened, as if repetition might change the outcome.

I wasn't ready to return to normal work. I wasn't ready to “move on.” I requested leave. A long one. And then I went home. Home has its own kind of medicine. It doesn't arrive in bottles or prescriptions. It arrives in food, in silence, in familiar walls. And, in my case, it arrived in my mother. Motherly love came to the rescue, the way it often does when a man's pride has collapsed and he doesn't know where to put himself. She scolded me. She cried. She fussed over my knee. She fussed over my food. She fussed over my mood. She didn't allow me to romanticise my pain. She didn't allow me to drown in it either. She treated me like a son who was hurt — not like an officer who had failed. And that distinction mattered. At home, I wasn't the man who had resigned from the MARCOS course. I was just her child.

The days passed slowly. The knee rested. The body softened. The mind resisted recovery at first, as if it didn't trust peace. But gradually, the noise faded. Not completely. Not cleanly. But enough. Somewhere between the scolding, the food, and the long afternoons of doing nothing, the wound began to close. Not healed. Just closed enough not to bleed constantly. I had quit the course in mid-October. I returned to the ship briefly, then went on leave in early November. By the end of December

2001, I reported to the training establishment. It wasn't a triumphant return to work. It wasn't even a confident one. But it was a return. And that, I would learn later, was the only way a broken man begins again — not with new dreams, not with motivational speeches, but with the small, stubborn act of showing up when he would rather disappear.

The maroon beret was no longer waiting for me. But life was. And somewhere, in the background, running — that old companion — was still there, quiet and patient, waiting for me to remember that sometimes the only thing you can do after losing everything you wanted... is to put one foot in front of the other.....

CHAPTER 10

The Long Way Back

“Healing is not linear.” - Brianna Wiest

When I reported to the training establishment in late December 2001, my body looked healed. Not completely, not perfectly, but healed enough to fool people. The limp had reduced. The knee didn't scream at every step anymore. The bruises from the course had faded from skin and muscle. In uniform, with a straight back and a neutral face, I could pass as “normal” again. But mentally, I was still somewhere else. The MARCOS course had ended weeks ago, yet it continued inside me like an echo you can't locate. It wasn't the pain that haunted me anymore — it was the absence. The sudden vacuum that comes when your whole life is directed at something and then one day it simply isn't. The mind doesn't stop on command. It keeps running in circles long after the road has disappeared. I arrived with a knee that was recovering and a head that wasn't. At the time, I didn't realise that this mismatch would define the next phase of my life. The establishment itself was quieter than ship life, and certainly quieter than any training course. There was a routine, yes. A structure. But compared to the relentless tempo of the MARCOS course, this place felt almost... forgiving. The mornings didn't begin with the same violence. You weren't constantly sprinting from one activity to another. No one was waiting to break you for sport.

Yet the first few days were not comfortable. Comfort, I realised, is hard to accept when you've been punished for it recently. My body didn't know what to do with “normal” training.

My mind didn't know what to do with a day that wasn't designed to test survival. I went through the initial interviews with my seniors the way all officers do — polite, correct, present. They asked me about my background, my courses, my experience. They didn't ask what I had lost. They asked what I could do. Perhaps that was exactly what I needed. Within days, I was given charge. Two hundred-odd trainees. Raw recruits who had just joined, fresh from civilian life, still carrying their old selves in their posture, their eyes, their hesitation. For many of them, this was the first time they had been away from home. The first time someone had shouted at them without apology. The first time they had realised that discipline wasn't an idea — it was now a daily reality. They stood in lines that were never perfectly straight, struggled with timing, struggled with obedience, struggled with the simplest instructions that we, in uniform, had long stopped noticing.

And suddenly, my pain wasn't the centre of my day anymore. Responsibility had a way of doing that — it pushed grief to the margins without asking permission. When you are responsible for two hundred young men, you don't get the luxury of sulking. They would report sick for the slightest fevers. They would complain about blisters as if the foot had been personally betrayed. Some would look terrified at the thought of jumping into water. Some would avoid eye contact. Some were overconfident, the kind who arrive thinking training establishments exist only to confirm how tough they already are — and then reality politely rearranges them.

It was a fascinating time. You could see different uptake levels across the board. Some trainees struggled for long periods. It wasn't that they were weak — they were simply slow to adapt. The body needed time. The mind needed more. Some of them required repeated correction, encouragement, and scolding. They would fall behind, panic, then try harder, then fall behind

again. Others adjusted quickly. Within days, they began to look like they were made for the navy. Their movements sharpened. Their eyes lost some of their softness. Their voices began to carry more certainty. Discipline suited them. It gave them an identity they hadn't known they could wear. And then there were the ones who surprised you. The quiet trainee who struggled on Day One and then, without fanfare, began improving steadily until he became one of the best. The loud trainee who looked like a natural athlete but couldn't handle correction. The skinny boy who looked fragile but turned out to be indestructible. The village lad who had never seen a swimming pool in his life but refused to fear water once he decided he wouldn't.

Watching them was a strange kind of therapy — but I didn't recognise it as healing yet. At the time, it felt like a distraction. It forced me to remember something important: growth is ugly at first. Training does not look inspiring when you're living it. It looks like confusion, sweat, mistakes, stubbornness, and small humiliations. Inspiration comes later, when the suffering has turned into memory. In the middle of all this, I began noticing something that stayed with me. Most of these boys could not swim. Some could, but not properly. Some could splash their way across a pool as if their lives depended on it. Some could float, fear in their eyes. A few were decent. But a large majority — let's say eighty percent — were weak swimmers. Not because they were lazy or incapable, but because they simply hadn't had the opportunity. Many came from places where water meant wells, ponds, rivers — not structured swimming lessons. And suddenly, my diving course stopped feeling like a badge story. That shift — from achievement to application — quietly mattered. It became useful.

Teaching them basic swimming was strangely satisfying. It required patience. It required explaining what had become instinct for me. It required breaking fear into steps: breathing,

floating, trusting the water. You couldn't bully someone into comfort. You could only stay nearby long enough for fear to ease. When one of them finally floated properly for the first time, you could see disbelief on his face — the kind that becomes pride five seconds later. It reminded me, painfully, of myself not long ago.

The establishment was small. Small places do something interesting: they compress people into each other's lives. Social bonds grow stronger because there are fewer places to hide. Everyone knows everyone. Everyone sees everyone. Friendships form quickly, not because people are desperate, but because the environment is intimate. I found my gang. A group of colleagues — some seniors, some juniors, some coursemates — all of us handling our own groups of trainees, all of us sharing the same routines, the same frustrations, the same small victories. We became each other's relief. Amid training schedules and administrative headaches, we found time to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

And there was absurdity. There always is. You could be delivering a serious lecture on discipline and duty at nine in the morning, and by noon you'd be chasing a trainee who had somehow managed to disappear during a headcount. You could be explaining swimming basics with calm authority, and the next moment you'd be shouting at a boy who was standing in the water as if it were an enemy he refused to negotiate with. Over time, even my body began to loosen. Not suddenly. Not dramatically. But gradually. The knee began to cooperate. Pain reduced. Strength returned. And for the first time since resigning from the commando course, I began to feel that life wasn't only about what I had lost. It was also about what I was still capable of doing.

My accommodation was simple but comfortable enough. I had a roommate — actually two, at different times — both seniors, both good men, and both, in their own ways, friends. In life, roommates can be blessings or punishments. Mine were

blessings. We had a rhythm that didn't require constant conversation. Some evenings were quiet — both of us exhausted, sitting with our own thoughts. Other evenings were loud with laughter, jokes about trainees, jokes about officers, jokes about the Navy itself. A small place makes you creative with entertainment. When there's not much to do, you end up doing a lot.

There were hilarious moments too — the kind that seem insignificant until you realise, they are the very moments that bring you back to life. A trainee saying something unintentionally profound. Someone giving a speech with full confidence and completely wrong facts. A senior officer's dry remark left the room struggling to maintain discipline as laughter rose like a wave. And slowly, without me noticing, the heaviness began to lift. I was still carrying the wound of the course. I was still aware of the maroon beret that wasn't mine. But that wound was no longer bleeding daily. It was becoming a scar — still tender, still present, but no longer controlling everything. Not that I felt happy. But that I felt functional. And in a life like ours, functional is often the first step back to human.

If there was one thing that helped me recover, it wasn't a miracle medicine or a sudden burst of motivation. It was time. Time, routine, and the strange blessing of being kept busy in a place where the body had no choice but to move. By the time I settled into the training establishment, I realised this place had its own tempo — and it was early. Days began around 5:30 in the morning. You didn't wake up leisurely. You woke up because the day had already started without you. The trainees' PT had to be supervised, so we had to be there. Then they would change for classes, and again we had to be there. A large part of the actual instruction was handled by the sailor instructors — solid men, experienced, efficient — but oversight remained our responsibility. We were always around the trainees, always

moving with them, always watching them struggle, improve, falter, adjust.

It wasn't glamorous work. It was repetitive, practical, and relentless in its own way — not like the MARCOS course, which tried to break you, but like a system that kept you active simply because that was how the establishment breathed. Between classes, there would be swimming periods. Trainees would march to the swimming pool in groups, and we would be there. There were about twenty instructors whose job it was to teach them to swim properly — and thank God for that. But even with instructors present, we were there. Always. If you spend enough hours around raw recruits, you begin to understand something: they don't learn only from lessons. They learn from presence. They learn because someone is watching. Someone is expecting. Someone is not allowing them to escape the work just because it feels unfamiliar. And most of them needed that.

A lot of these boys were either dead sinkers or weak swimmers, exactly as I had noticed earlier. Not lazy — just inexperienced. Their fear wasn't dramatic. It was simple. The fear of sinking. The fear of being laughed at. The fear of water itself. What surprised me was how quickly fear can dissolve once a trainee realises he isn't going to be abandoned in it. After swimming, there was lunch. And after lunch was the games session. This, I'll admit, became my favourite part of the day — not because it was easy, but because it was alive. Games are where trainees forget to be trainees for a while. They stop thinking about uniform and start behaving like young men again — competitive, energetic, loud, occasionally stupid in ways that are almost charming. And we would join in. We played with them, not merely watched. We ran with them. We argued with them. We shouted at them when they cheated.

The establishment was in a small place, not very well connected. In those days, there were no mobile phones buzzing

in your pocket, no endless scrolling, no convenient escapes into digital distraction. If you were bored, you had to deal with it the way men used to in ancient times. By talking to each other. Or by playing more. As a result, evenings would often become extensions of the day. You'd come back, wash up, and then someone would call out — “Chal, thoda aur khelte hain (Come, let's play for a little longer).” And we'd go. Some of us started learning games we hadn't had the opportunity to play till then. Others rediscovered the joy of being tired for reasons that weren't punishment. Dinner was either in the mess or at a particular couple's place. That became another ritual. In a small place, friendships deepen because there isn't enough space to keep them superficial.

And somewhere in this life — this busy, physical, human routine — my body began to come back. Not dramatically. But reliably. My knee stopped feeling like a constant complaint. It didn't become perfect overnight, but it began cooperating again. The stiffness reduced. The fear reduced. I began trusting the joint slowly, the way you begin trusting a friend again after he has embarrassed you in public. What helped was that I didn't have the luxury of overthinking. There was always something to do. And then, after the first six months, something else happened: I began to enjoy my work.

The trainee batches rotated every six months. You'd finish one batch, and just when you began recognising all the faces and personalities, a new batch would arrive — fresh, confused, and ready to be transformed. It kept the environment alive. It didn't let you stagnate. Once I got a hang of the training routine, I began making tweaks. Small ones at first. Then bolder ones. I wasn't trying to reinvent the Navy. I was trying to give the boys a little purpose — to make physical training feel less like punishment and more like preparation. To make them understand that there's pride in doing something well, even if it's just running in

time, standing straighter, or swimming without fear. I remember putting up a huge board in my division. In big letters, it read:

RUN FOR FUN, DRILL FOR THRILL

It was corny. I know. But it worked. Sometimes, corny works because it's simple enough to remember when you're tired. The trainees probably laughed at it initially. They must have. Trainees are professionally required to laugh at anything that looks like optimism. But slowly, the words became familiar. And familiarity, in training, becomes habit. The sailor instructors I worked with were excellent. They took on a load without complaining. They were practical men. They didn't overthink. They didn't romanticise hardship. They simply did their job, and did it well. When I suggested changes, they didn't roll their eyes or resist. They said, "Theek hai, sir (Ok, sir)" and made it happen. In the Navy, you learn that leadership is not always about orders. Sometimes it is about being lucky enough to have a team that carries you even when you are still rebuilding yourself.

And then, as if the universe decided to stop being cruel for a while, a junior officer reported. I knew him from before, and he loved running. Not the polite "fitness running" people mention in conversations. Real running. The kind where you don't need a reason. The kind where you don't ask how far, only where. He showed up one afternoon with that familiar gleam in his eye — the gleam runners have when they've found another runner and now feel obligated to ruin his peace. "Chalo sir (Come sir)," he said. "Wahan chalte hain daudne (Let's go for a run there)." I looked at the sun, the heat, the terrible timing. "Isn't it too hot?" I asked. He shrugged, as if heat were a rumour. "Koi Nahin, sir (No issue, sir)," he said, with absolute confidence. "Wahan jaayenge... Tarbooz khayenge... aur wapas

aa jayenge (Will run to that place... have watermelon... and run back).”

Watermelon. That was his strategy. Not hydration plans, not electrolytes, not scientific recovery. Just watermelon. It was so absurd that it made me smile. And that’s how my long runs returned. Not through discipline, not through determination, not through some heroic comeback scene. They returned in the company of someone who treated running like a casual outing and heat like a minor inconvenience that could be solved by fruit. We went out. We ran. Slowly at first. Then longer. Then like old times. And with every kilometre, something inside me loosened — not the knee, but the mind. The part of me that had been trapped on the commando course, stuck on that rope, stuck at that moment of impact, stuck inside the shame of resignation... began to drift out. Running didn’t erase failure. But it gave me a place to put it — and once it had a place, it stopped spilling into everything else.

By the end of 2002, I realised I was ready again. Not in the dramatic way of movie comebacks — no internal anthem playing in my head, no sudden transformation. It was quieter than that. It was the absence of fear when I ran. The knee was no longer a constant negotiation. My mind was no longer stuck in old nightmares. The heaviness that had followed me for months had become manageable — a memory rather than a wound. I was functioning. I was laughing again. I was enjoying my work. Most importantly, I wasn’t flinching every time life offered me a challenge. That’s how you know recovery is real.

And then, as if the Navy had a special department that monitored your emotional stability and tested it immediately, a communication came. Volunteers were required for the Advanced Diver Course. I remember that moment very distinctly. Not because it was complicated, but because it was so clean. So direct. A door opened again, the kind I had once

believed would remain shut forever. It wasn't the Marine Commando course. But it belonged to the same family of choices — the kind where the body is involved, the mind is tested, and you walk into discomfort not because you enjoy pain, but because you want to know what you are capable of. And it would lead me to the MARCOS course once again.

Two of us decided to volunteer. One was me. The other was a senior colleague — a solid officer, the kind you trust without needing reasons. He wasn't just a coworker. He was part of that small-place fraternity where friendships build quietly, over daily routines and shared exhaustion.

We went together to meet the CO of the establishment. In units, the CO isn't just an appointment. He is the pivot around which everything rotates. Training, manpower, schedules, administrative fires — all of it eventually lands at his table. And like most COs who have lived a Navy life long enough, he was practical to the bone. We presented our case. He listened. And then he said, calmly, as if he was announcing the weather: "I can't send both of you at the same time." Fair enough. He explained that if both of us left, there would be no replacement. Trainees wouldn't pause their lives just because officers wanted to do courses. The establishment couldn't run on motivation. It ran on bodies being present.

Then he delivered the punchline. "I can send one. You decide among yourselves." It was a perfect "divide and rule" strategy. The kind that looks neutral on paper but instantly shifts pressure from the system to the individual. For a moment, I almost admired it. Not because it was kind, but because it was efficient. We stepped out and spoke privately. There was no argument, no ego contest. The senior officer looked at me and said something that was both sensible and painful. "Age is on your side," he said. "You still have time. You can volunteer next year." Then he paused, and added the part that mattered. "But I

won't get another chance. There is an age restriction. If I miss this now... I miss it."

It was said without drama. No manipulation. No emotional blackmail. Just truth. And that truth landed heavily. I stood there, feeling something familiar rise — the old hunger to seize opportunities before they slip away. It was the same instinct that had pushed me toward the Commando course. The same urgency that had made me argue with seniors and stand stubbornly before my CO. But this time, something else was present too. Maturity. Or maybe not maturity — maybe just a different kind of learning. The kind that comes when you've lost something once and realised that not every decision is about proving yourself. I wanted the course, yes. I could see myself doing it. I could already imagine the training, the exhaustion, the satisfaction of being tested again. But I also knew this: if I fought him for this chance and took it away from him, I would carry that weight far longer than any badge. With a heavy heart, I agreed. "Okay, sir," I said. "You go." It wasn't a heroic sacrifice. It didn't feel noble. It felt like swallowing something bitter and necessary.

He went back to the CO and told him he alone would be volunteering. And just like that, the decision was final. He left for the course soon after, and life returned to its routines — trainees, training, swimming, games, laughter, discipline, and the slow passing of months. For me, there was no resentment. Only a quiet sense of waiting. Sometimes life doesn't deny you. It simply delays you. By then, I had started learning the difference. Soon after that, I applied for leave. Not a dramatic leave. Not an escape. Just time away — a break to breathe, to reset, to let life settle for a while. I didn't know it then, but that leave was going to change something fundamental. Something major was about to shift. And that... belongs to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 11

A New Kind of Distance

“Love is not about how far you go together, but whether you are willing to keep going.” - Unknown

The leave was going well. There was no crisis, no major drama, no urgent reason to be away. It was one of those ordinary leaves that officers rarely appreciate while they are living them — quiet, comfortable, filled with home-cooked food and familiar faces, with the steady rhythm of days that don’t demand constant performance. I had gone home expecting nothing more than rest. The knee was better by then. Not perfect, but functional. My body had returned to its old reliability, the way it eventually does when you give it time and stop trying to prove something every day. Emotionally too, I had stabilised. The dark, hollow weeks after the MARCOS course were behind me. The bitterness was still there somewhere, but it had stopped sitting at the centre of everything. In other words, I was doing okay.

And when you’re doing okay, you become vulnerable in a new way: you start imagining the future again. I was twenty-seven then. Twenty-seven sounds young when you’re sitting in a family living room with your mother offering you a second helping of dinner. It sounds older when you’re surrounded by parents who have seen enough life to know that youth doesn’t last as long as it feels. It sounds ancient when you’re speaking to relatives who treat marriage like a mandatory formality, a mark on a checklist rather than a turning point. The marriage talk wasn’t new. My parents had been dropping hints for a while, sometimes gently, sometimes not so gently. “So... what are you thinking?” “When

do you plan to settle down?” “You can’t keep postponing these things.” They were polite about it, but persistent. Indian parents don’t just ask a question once. They ask it annually, monthly, and then daily, till the question becomes a background soundtrack to your life.

Earlier, my answers used to come easily. “No, no,” I would say, as if the idea itself were absurd. “I’m too young.” It wasn’t entirely true, but it sounded respectable. The real truth was simpler and less mature: I didn’t want to. Not yet. I liked being on my own. I liked my independence — not in a rebellious, dramatic way, but in the quiet, everyday ways that matter: earning money, living alone, deciding where to go, what to do, when to sleep, when to run, when to be irresponsible. I liked the freedom of having no one waiting for me at home with expectations beyond basic survival. I was also... busy in the head.

At that stage of my life, my mind was preoccupied with courses, goals, and the next step. Diving had been an obsession. The Marine Commando dream had been something even bigger. Even after it failed, something inside me still lived in that world — the world of proving, of becoming, of chasing something that felt like an identity. Marriage, by comparison, felt like added weight. Not a burden — calling it that would be unfair — but responsibility. A new kind of responsibility. The kind you can’t solve by running longer or pushing harder. The kind that requires patience, compromise, and presence. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to become that version of myself yet. So, for a long time, I avoided the subject. Sometimes with humour, sometimes with stubbornness, sometimes with the classic officer excuse: “Let me finish this course first.” As if life politely waits for your syllabus to end.

But during that leave... something shifted. Not overnight. Not dramatically. It was quieter than that. I was sitting at home, surrounded by family — parents there, my married sister visiting

too, her life already settled in a way that looked ordinary yet comforting. There was warmth in the house. Routine. Laughter. Small fights that ended quickly. Conversations without deadlines. And for the first time, I felt a kind of tiredness that running couldn't solve. Not physical tiredness. A different kind. The kind that comes when you've been carrying only yourself for too long and suddenly realise that maybe it's time to build something that isn't only about personal freedom. I didn't say all this out loud, of course. Indian men rarely do. We just sit there looking thoughtful, and our mothers immediately assume either a stomach problem or a marriage-ready mindset. During that leave, when the topic came up again, I surprised myself. I didn't reflexively say no. I didn't laugh it off. I didn't say "too young" as if youth were an official reason. Instead, I paused. And then I said something like... "Okay." That one word. Not enthusiastic. Not romantic. Not cinematic. Just acceptance, with it the quiet sense that something irreversible had begun.

And once you say "okay" at home, life moves fast. I sometimes joke that the Navy moves faster than civilians, but Indian families can outrun even the Navy when they decide it's time to get you married. Conversations began. Names were discussed. Phone calls were made. Meetings were arranged. Schedules were aligned. There was a strange efficiency in it all, as if an entire family system had been waiting in idle mode and now suddenly resumed its main function. And somewhere inside the practical madness of it, I was watching myself.

Was I really ready for this?

Was I doing this because I wanted to... or because it was time?

Was I settling down... or simply surrendering?

The questions came, as they always do. But they didn't frighten me. They felt normal — the kind of questions you should have when your life is about to change.

By mid-December 2002, I was engaged. I won't pretend it was a grand event. It was simple. Both families were present. We met, spoke for a while, and did what arranged marriages often begin with — a polite conversation where two people try to compress their entire future into half an hour. There wasn't much time. Half an hour, maybe. Forty minutes at most. That was all the world gave us to begin building something that, ideally, was supposed to last a lifetime. I remember thinking: What does one even say? You can't summarise a whole life in a brief meeting. You can't explain your childhood, your temperament, your Navy career, and your obsession with running in the time it takes tea to cool down. Still, I tried. But even if I had tried very hard, I don't think I could have explained it fully. Some lives are understood only by living them. A naval life, especially, is not a profession you describe; it is a routine you adapt to.

We exchanged rings. It was polite. It was calm. It was sincere.

And then, just like that, it was done. People smiled, sweets were offered, and everyone went back to their lives — as if something ordinary had happened. But inside me, I could feel the shift. Not a dramatic shift. Just the quiet awareness that a new chapter had begun without asking my permission to feel “ready.” When I returned to my unit, happiness surrounded me like a warm crowd. My colleagues were happy. My small circle was delighted. There were jokes, of course — there always are. There were comments, nudges, and congratulations. The kind of teasing that isn't meant to embarrass you, but to remind you that you're no longer a free man.

Then came one of the most uniquely armed-forces moments of my life. The formal permission. In the services, you don't simply get married. You seek permission. You submit an application. You file a request. A life event becomes a paper event before it becomes a lived event. I remember writing a formal application to my Commanding Officer, asking for permission to get married. The wording was so clinical that it almost sounded like I was requesting an equipment change. Something like: Request permission to change marital status. Change marital status. Not "Sir, I have found someone I want to spend my life with." Not "Sir, I am about to begin a new chapter." Just... change marital status. As if the heart were a form that can be filed and approved. The permission was granted, naturally. The paper went through. The system remained satisfied. And everyone around me treated this as perfectly normal — which, in uniformed life, it is.

After that, life became warmer and more personal. I began speaking to my fiancée regularly. I started writing letters — a lot of letters. Not the polite "hope you are fine" kind, but long ones. The kind where you tell someone about your life, your habits, your family, your past, your thoughts. The kind where you build a bridge with words because time and distance don't allow you to build it any other way. A lot of what I wrote was about the future. Trying to explain my life as best I could. Trying to prepare her for what it means to live in a world shaped by postings, routines, sudden movements, and the strange reality that sometimes home shifts with the orders of a signal. But the truth is, no one can fully prepare anyone for this life. You learn it only by living it. And in March 2003, I got married. There was no formal honeymoon planned. No exotic escape. No perfectly timed romantic break. I had to get back to the unit as training continued. But we had what all newly married couples have for a while — the honeymoon period that follows you into ordinary days.

We returned, and reality arrived gently but firmly. For the first time, I was allotted a government quarter. It may not sound like a romantic milestone, but it is a big one. The first quarter feels like your first real home in service life — a small piece of stability the system gives you. And now I wasn't moving into it alone. We started setting up our home the way all newly married couples do: with confusion, excitement, and repeated mistakes. Shopping became an adventure. Not the heroic adventure of divers and commandos — a different one. The civilian kind. The one where you go out to buy two things and come back with ten, and still forget the one thing you truly needed. We shopped for utensils. For “ghar ka samaan (household items).” For a fridge, a TV, mattresses, curtains. And every time we bought something, we felt like we were building a life brick by brick — even if the bricks were occasionally overpriced and bought without understanding the difference between “nice” and “necessary.” Those early marriage days were fun. Mostly harmonious. Sometimes quarrels, yes — because what is marriage without small quarrels? But the quarrels were not heavy then. They passed quickly. You argued, you sulked, you laughed, you moved on.

One of her pet peeves surfaced early. The place we were posted at had many newly married couples. A common activity for newlyweds was walking together in the evenings — strolling, holding hands, doing the simple “newlywed thing” that everyone seemed to be doing. And then there was me. I wasn't walking. I was running. She would say, “Let's go for a walk.” And I would say, with full sincerity, “No, no... I have to go for my run.” To her, it was baffling. To me, it was normal. In my head, I was still being romantic. I mean, I was coming back after the run, wasn't I? But apparently, in marriage, romance does not include disappearing for an hour and calling it quality time. So yes, that became a recurring friction. Not a war. Just a reminder that marriage, like everything else, requires adjustment.

Running stayed with me through it. Not as rebellion. Not as escape. Just as a quiet constant — the one thing that kept me steady as I learned how to be a husband. Then came the bigger news. My wife got pregnant. I remember going quiet. Not because I wasn't happy — I was — but because happiness sometimes arrives with shock, and shock often arrives with silence. A child was not just another responsibility. It was a new universe entering our lives. It wasn't something you trained for. There was no syllabus. No screening. No selection list. Life simply handed me the news and said, "Now, become someone who can carry this." Suddenly, time had a new meaning. Not course calendars. Not posting cycles. A personal countdown. A quiet pressure that didn't demand panic, only readiness. And then, like it always does, the Navy brought the next turn.

Orders came, and with them a new course — a long one. Ten or eleven months. A serious professional step that would shape the next stage of my career. It was good news. But now good news carried weight. Earlier, movement meant only me — my adjustment, my fatigue, my ambition. Now it meant planning as a couple. It meant stepping into the next phase of life with responsibility sitting beside me, not as a burden, but as reality. This, I realised, was the new kind of distance. Not the kind you run on instinct. The kind you run with another person's life folded into yours. The kind where endurance isn't measured in kilometres, but in steadiness — the ability to keep showing up, without drama, without escape, even when you are tired in ways running cannot fix.

The baby was due in May. The course was coming. Life was shifting again. Through it all, I kept running. Not as a performance. Not as a goal. Just as a thread — the one thing that kept me intact as everything else expanded. I didn't know what the next chapter would bring. I would still run. Not because it was easy. Because it was mine. And in a life that was no longer

The Ordinary Runner

only about me, that small, stubborn habit felt like the one thing that would keep me standing as the world moved forward — fast, unpredictably, and without waiting for anyone to feel ready.

CHAPTER 12

Held Together by Running

“Excellence is not an act, but a habit.”
- Will Durant (*paraphrasing Aristotle*)

Somewhere between courses, postings, and the general busyness of Navy life, my world acquired a new focus. A baby girl. It sounds like a simple sentence when you say it fast. But nothing about it is simple when you live it. I had seen responsibility before. I had worn it like a uniform — crisp, correct, visible from a distance. I had carried it in training establishments and aboard ships, in the routines of a service that doesn't pause just because your personal life is changing. But this was different. This wasn't a responsibility as a duty. This was a responsibility of love.

When my elder daughter arrived in our lives, I remember thinking — not in words, but in a kind of quiet shock — So this is how it happens. Not with dramatic music or big speeches, but with a small face, a fragile body, and the sudden realisation that life is no longer only about you. It is about someone who cannot run away from anything. Someone who depends on you completely. The Navy teaches you discipline. It teaches you how to function even when you don't feel like it. It teaches you to look calm on the outside, even when your mind is doing sprint repeats on the inside. But it does not teach you what to do when you hold your child for the first time. That moment isn't a drill. It's not a task. It's not a course you clear. It's not even something you “achieve.” It's something that happens to you. And suddenly you're aware of your own hands — how large they are, how

clumsy they feel, how unprepared they seem to hold something so delicate. You find yourself breathing differently, softer, as if the world will break if you exhale too loudly.

I looked at her and felt a kind of protective fear I hadn't known before. Not the fear of failure. Not the fear of getting hurt. A deeper fear — the fear of not being enough. Until then, even my biggest struggles had been personal. Injury, course pressure, ambition, disappointment — they were all mine to carry, mine to solve, mine to outlast. Even when life had been harsh, at least it had been focused on me. But now the world had expanded. There was my wife. There was our home. There was this tiny new life that had arrived and quietly (ok, not so quietly) changed the meaning of everything else. The same routines continued — you still wake up, still report, still work, still train, still behave like an officer — but inside, something had shifted permanently.

You start measuring time differently. Not by course schedules or Navy routines, but by softer things: sleep, feeding, small cries in the middle of the night, small smiles that feel like rewards the universe gives you for staying alive. I was happy. And I was terrified. In fact, in fatherhood, they arrive as a package deal. Around this time, my life was also entering another phase — the professional kind. The course, the next posting, the steady climb of expectations that doesn't stop for personal milestones. The Navy doesn't say, Congratulations, take your time. It says, Congratulations, now report. The external world kept moving, as it always does. And my internal world had to keep up.

What held it together for me — what kept my mind from wobbling under the weight of these new roles — was something old and familiar. Running. I wasn't running for medals. I wasn't running for applause. I wasn't even running with a plan. I was running because it was the one place where my thoughts lined up properly. The one place where the noise faded. The one place where I could feel like myself, even as “myself” was rapidly

evolving into husband, officer, and now, father. It didn't make me instantly wiser. But it did one important thing: it gave me a sense of rhythm. One foot. One breath. One more step. It reminded me — quietly, stubbornly — that life is not managed in one heroic moment. It is managed the way you finish a long run. By showing up again the next day. And then the next. And then the next.

Fatherhood softened my life in ways the Navy never could. But it also sharpened it. Because once you have a child, you don't just think about how far you can run — you think about how long you can hold things together. How steady you can remain when life begins stacking responsibilities like weight plates and expects you not to flinch. And as if to test that steadiness, the Navy did what it does best. It moved on. The specialisation course was waiting. New books, new expectations, new instructors, new standards. And somewhere between diapers at home and deadlines at work, I realised that this phase of my life would demand a different kind of endurance — not on the road, but inside it.

By the time I reported for the course, I had already lived enough Navy life to know one truth: Nothing humbles an officer like becoming a student again. As a junior officer, you think you're always learning. And you are. But ship life teaches you through action — through duties, routines, mistakes, corrections, and the occasional sharp word delivered at the correct volume. You learn because you have to. School life is different. In school, you learn because you're being watched. Not just watched — assessed. You are graded. Compared. Ranked. Evaluated. Your performance is documented in a way that makes even confident men suddenly develop an interest in prayer. The first few days of the course felt familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Familiar because the Navy knows only one way to function: routine, discipline, and deadlines. Unfamiliar because the pressure

suddenly wasn't coming from unit duties; it was coming from academics. From subjects that demanded attention even when your brain wanted to switch off. From instructors who didn't care about your previous postings because, here, you were being measured only by what you could absorb and reproduce.

It was like being back in training again. Only this time, I wasn't a boy in uniform. I was a married man. A father. At home, there was a child who didn't care about my studies. She cared about milk, sleep, warmth, and the fact that her world was safe as long as we were present. At work, there was a course that didn't care about my sleepless nights. It cared about performance, attendance, comprehension, and execution. It cared about how sharp you were at 0800 hrs, whether you had slept or not. It cared about whether you could answer questions, handle practicals, and remain competent under observation.

So yes, that was the first lesson of the course for me: Life doesn't pause its syllabus just because your personal life has expanded.

And yet, strangely, I didn't resent it. By then, I had stopped expecting life to be convenient. I had stopped expecting fairness. I had stopped expecting smoothness. Navy life trains you into acceptance, the way the sea trains you into humility. I did what I always did. I showed up. I studied. I listened. I took notes like my life depended on them — because in that moment, my career did. But something else happened during this course, something that brought back a part of me I hadn't fully enjoyed in a long time. I ran. A lot. Not just "I went for a jog." Proper running. Regular. Familiar. Unforced. I was running because the environment demanded it and because my body remembered how to answer.

The School had its own culture. It wasn't just classrooms and lectures. It was also about unit pride, inter-unit events,

participation, representation, and a quiet, unspoken expectation that if you had a certain background, you didn't sit on the sidelines. Being a diver came with its own invisible label. The label was simple: fit. When the unit began preparing for events like the Station Cross Country, it wasn't really a question of whether I would participate. It was expected. In the Navy, expectations are often delivered without words. You simply found yourself on the list, and you understood that your name was there because your body had a reputation. I remember being part of the cross-country team and the strange satisfaction of it. Because it wasn't about medals. It was about belonging. About being useful in the simplest way: if the unit needed people who could run, I would run. And I liked that. Running for my own peace was one thing. Running as part of a group identity was another. There was camaraderie in it. A quiet pride. A sense that I was not merely surviving my career — I was contributing to its spirit.

The swimming competitions came too. Again, being a diver meant you didn't have the luxury of pretending to be "busy" when swimming events were discussed. You were part of the team. Sometimes by choice, sometimes by default, sometimes because people simply looked at you and assumed you would be comfortable in water. To be honest, I was. Water was no longer an enemy for me. The diving course had taken care of that. It had completely rewritten my relationship with water. It had taught me calm. It had taught me how panic wastes oxygen. It had taught me how to breathe through discomfort. Joining the swimming team didn't feel like extra pressure. It felt like a reminder: I had built something in myself that still existed, even after losses. Nothing heroic. Just continuity.

And then there was shooting. In most people's minds, fitness and shooting belong to different worlds. Running is sweat. Shooting is stillness. Running is movement. Shooting is minimal

movement. Yet they're not as separate as they look. I became part of the unit's shooting team and won prizes. It was a different kind of satisfaction. Running gives you a high that arrives through exhaustion. Shooting gives you a calm that arrives through focus. Both demand discipline. Both punish impatience. Both expose your internal state without mercy. If you are distracted, your shot will tell on you. If you are sloppy, your breathing will tell on you. And somewhere in that contrast, I found a strange balance. It was as if my life had become a mix of extremes — a baby at home, academics at work, running in the mornings, shooting on the range, swimming sessions, unit events, and the daily effort of looking like a man who has everything under control.

Did I have everything under control? Of course not. But I was getting better at the act. The course itself was demanding. There were days when you came back from classes and your head felt full — not full in a meaningful way, but full like a cupboard where someone has stuffed too many files. You didn't feel smarter. You felt packed. And then you still had to read. Still had to revise. Still had to prepare. In younger days, I could study and forget the world. In those days, the world wouldn't allow itself to be forgotten. There was a home. There was a wife. There was a child. There were domestic things that required attention. There were moments when I sat with my notes and could hear my daughter's small sounds from the other room, and something inside me would soften for a second, and then I would feel guilty for softening — as if tenderness was a distraction.

Not a loud conflict. A silent conflict. The guilt of not being fully present in either world. The guilt of studying when you should be with family. The guilt of being with family when you should be studying. So, what did I do? I ran. Not always long. Not always fast. Just consistently. Some runs were short and practical — twenty minutes, thirty minutes, just enough to clear the mind. Some runs were longer when time allowed. But the

point wasn't distance. The point was a reset. Because running did something studying could not. It removed noise. It returned me to one simple truth: the body moves forward one step at a time, and the mind follows. There is no shortcut. There is no cleverness. There is only steadiness.

And I needed that steadiness more than ever during the course. Humour was present too — inevitably — the kind that appears when you realise the absurdity of your own life. One part of the day would see you discussing serious professional matters, surrounded by other officers who looked just as serious as you. In another part of the day, you'd be running as if your unit's honour depended on your lungs. Then you'd be in a swimming pool, and someone would shout instructions as if you were about to win an Olympic medal. Then you'd hold a rifle and breathe as if your entire soul had to pass through that single shot. And then you'd go home and become a man who can't change a diaper fast enough.

I don't know which version of me was more incompetent. The student officer trying to remember technical details? Or the new father trying to understand why babies cry as if it were their full-time job? At least in running, I knew the rules. In family life, the rules were less clear. Sometimes doing your best still wasn't enough. Sometimes doing everything right still left a crying baby. Sometimes you tried to help and were told you were doing it wrong. That was humbling too. But it also kept me grounded. Because nothing kills arrogance like domestic life. By the time the course moved into its deeper phases, I could feel myself becoming sharper. Not just academically — professionally and mentally sharper. The pressure was there, yes. But it wasn't crushing me. If anything, it was shaping me. My academic performance was respectable. My involvement in unit activities kept me physically alive. And my running stayed woven into everything, like a steady thread holding the fabric together.

If I look back now, I realise this period of the course gave me something precious. It gave me structure at a time when my personal life was changing fast. It gave me purpose at a time when fatherhood could have easily made me drift into comfort. And it gave me a community — a unit identity — that reminded me that even as my home life grew softer, my professional life still demanded sharpness. In that sense, the course wasn't merely a professional milestone. It was a balancing act. A constant toggling between two worlds. The home world that needed warmth. The Navy world that demanded competence. And somewhere between the two, there was me — running, swimming, studying, shooting, learning how to be present without collapsing under the weight of being needed everywhere. I stayed steady. And in a life that was beginning to fill up with roles and expectations, steadiness was its own kind of achievement.

If there is one word that sounds impressive in conversations, it is balance. People say it as if it's a skill you can acquire with a few good intentions and a neat timetable. "Work-life balance." "Family balance." "Fitness balance." As if life were a clean equation — you add effort, subtract distractions, and everything settles into harmony. In reality, I realised balance isn't a state. Balance is a negotiation you keep losing every day. And then you show up again the next day and try again — slightly wiser, slightly more tired, and with slightly less confidence in motivational quotes.

By the time I began the course, our marriage had already crossed its first-year mark. We were no longer in that early newlywed softness where everything feels fresh and forgiving. We had entered something more real: routines, responsibilities, and the quiet realisation that love is not only a feeling — it's a decision you repeat, even on ordinary days when nobody is clapping for it. And we had a baby girl. That single event had completely altered the definition of balance. Because now it wasn't only

about managing work and a wife. It was about managing work, a wife, and a child — and still somehow remaining a human being in between.

One of the biggest misconceptions about uniformed life is that the officer is always surrounded by people, always supported, always “taken care of.” There is truth in that — the system is structured, and there is always a routine. But the emotional load is yours. The loneliness is yours. The responsibility of choosing priorities is yours. My wife and child did not travel with me immediately for the new posting. My wife had gone home for the delivery and was convalescing there. It made sense. It was practical. It was safer. A mother’s home has its own healing power — the kind that no government accommodation can provide. For a while, I was in one place and my family was in another.

That small separation — even if it was temporary — taught me something I hadn’t understood properly until then. That marriage is not only about being together. It is also about enduring the periods when you cannot be together. In the Navy, we prepare ourselves for separations professionally. Ships, duties, courses, deployments — it is a known part of the career. You expect it. You even speak about it casually, as if saying it casually makes it easier. But personal separations are different. The absence doesn’t hit you in uniform. It hits you in the quiet moments. When you come back to your room after a long day, take off your shoes, and there is no conversation waiting. No small domestic noise. No familiar presence. And when your mind suddenly drifts to the thought that somewhere else, your wife is healing, your child is growing, and you are not there to witness those first small changes, it’s a strange kind of emptiness. Not painful enough to break you, but present enough to keep poking you.

I tried doing what most men do in such situations. I kept myself busy. During the day, the course demanded attention anyway. Classes, notes, drills, expectations — they filled time efficiently. In the evenings, I would call home, speak as much as possible, try to sound calm and supportive, and try to play the role of the steady husband even when I didn't always feel steady. But the thing is, you can't live on phone calls. A voice helps, yes. But a voice cannot replace presence. And this is where running quietly saved me again. Because when you are alone in a posting — even temporarily — you need something that keeps you from sinking into your own thoughts too much.

Running gave me that. It didn't make the distance shorter. It didn't remove the responsibility. It didn't solve the longing. But it gave the mind a place to pour itself out. Some days, I ran because I wanted to. Other days, I ran because if I didn't, I didn't know what else to do with all the restlessness inside me.

When my wife and daughter finally joined me after about a month, the house filled up again — not with noise, but with life. The air changes when family arrives. A room stops being just a room. It becomes a home. There are routines again — feeding schedules, small cries, small moments of panic, small moments of laughter. There's a towel drying somewhere, baby's clothes lying around, things that look messy but feel like proof that life is happening. And suddenly, balance becomes even more complicated. Because now there is no absence but a presence to manage. A baby demands a kind of attention that doesn't respect your fatigue. A baby doesn't say, "Okay, you had a long day, we'll do this later." A baby simply exists and requires you to adjust your life around that existence. And my wife was adjusting too. Motherhood is its own training course, only without instructors and without an option to resign. She was learning everything on the job. So was I. Which meant our lives were full, but not always neat.

And in that fullness, running became the recurring small conflict in our marriage — the way it does in most households where one partner runs and the other doesn't understand why. For her, time together felt normal. Conversation. The quiet proof of companionship. That too when I couldn't devote adequate time because of the demands of the course. For me, running alone felt normal when I had free time. A reset button. A return to myself. A small ritual that kept me steady. When she said, "Let's go for a walk," and I said, "I have to go for my run," it wasn't really about walking versus running. It was about time. About attention. About the invisible question every young couple asks in some form: "Where do I fit in your life?" In the beginning, I didn't understand this properly. I thought love should automatically understand. I thought explaining should be enough. But love doesn't run on explanations. It runs on behaviour. And if you repeatedly choose your run over your spouse's request for time, the message becomes louder than your intention.

It took time for me to see that. And it took time for her to see the other side too — that running wasn't me escaping her. It was me managing myself. That when I ran, I didn't return emptier. I returned better. Calmer. More patient. Less likely to snap at small irritations that weren't her fault. Yes, balance became a daily exercise. Sometimes I walked. Mostly I ran. Sometimes I ran early and kept evenings free. Sometimes I skipped a run and paid for it with restlessness. Sometimes she adjusted. Sometimes I adjusted. We weren't perfect. But we were learning. That is what marriage is, really. Not the wedding. Not the photographs. Not the ceremony.

Marriage is the quiet, daily act of choosing each other, even when you are tired, even when you feel misunderstood, even when your life has more moving parts than your brain can comfortably hold. It was during this phase that I began to

understand something crucial: In the Navy, you can be “excellent” professionally and still fail at home if you don’t pay attention. No medal protects you from domestic loneliness. No course result can substitute for emotional presence. No professional praise can compensate for the feeling of being taken for granted. The reverse is also true. You can have the warmest home and still feel professionally unsatisfied if you stop sharpening yourself.

Balance was a constant correction, like running itself. You don’t run in a straight line forever. You keep correcting your posture, your breath, your pace. On some days, you simply do your best to keep moving. That was life now. Not single. Not simple. Not only about my ambitions. A shared life. A life where responsibility had a face, a name, and a small heartbeat sleeping in the next room. In that life, running didn’t disappear. It couldn’t. It remained the one steady thread I held on to — not because I wanted to be selfish, but because I wanted to stay sane. Because the truth is: the best gift you can give your family is not sacrifice. It is stability. For me, stability came in a very ordinary form. One foot. One breath. One run. Again!

I finished the course in May 2005. On paper, it was a clean ending — the kind the Navy likes. One phase complete. Another phase ready. You clear the academic grind, collect your results, wear that invisible stamp of being “trained,” and then you’re posted back to where you really belong. Ships. Because no matter how long you spend in classrooms, the Navy eventually brings you back to the sea. It is almost a law of nature. You can delay it with courses and appointments, but sooner or later, the sea calls you back like an old addiction.

I remember the feeling of leaving course life behind. Course life has pressure — serious pressure — but it is a predictable pressure. You know the timetable. You know the syllabus. You know what is expected of you. You know when the day begins,

when it ends, when your mind is supposed to be switched on, and when you can switch it off. Ship life is different. Ship life is not a timetable. Ship life is a mood. And the mood can change at any moment. The moment I received the ship posting, I felt that old familiarity return — the smell of salt air in the imagination, the sound of steel under your feet, the sense of duty that can't be postponed because the sea does not care about your convenience. There was excitement too, because I was going back as a more qualified officer. The course had sharpened me. It had added weight to my professional identity. But alongside excitement, there was another feeling. A quieter one. The awareness that life was no longer only mine. Because now there was my wife. And there was our one-year-old baby. And ship life is not kind to families — not deliberately unkind, but indifferent. Ships take you away. Ships demand time. Ships disrupt routine. Ships are unpredictable. You can't promise dinner at home when you might be sailing. You can't promise weekends when your duty roster laughs at the concept of a weekend.

So, we made a practical decision. We weren't sure we would get accommodation quickly at the new station. Even if we did, moving a one-year-old into uncertainty felt unnecessary. Babies don't care about postings, but they do care about stability — familiar faces, surroundings, and arms. We decided that my wife and daughter would go home first. She would stay with family, rest properly, and regain her rhythm. I would go to the new posting alone, settle in, get the house and the logistics sorted, and only then call them. It made perfect sense. It was practical. It was the kind of decision adults make. But even practical decisions carry a price. It is fine until you are the one eating dinner alone. Until you are the one opening the door of an empty house. Until you are the one walking into a silence that feels too large.

I reported to the ship. As expected, the ship didn't care about my emotions. It cared about reporting time. It cared about

joining formalities. It cared about duties. It cared about professional competence. It cared about whether I could do the job from day one. The Navy is like that. It can be brutal, but it is also honest. It doesn't pretend to be your therapist. It is your employer. Your institution. Your identity. Sometimes your entire life. In those first few weeks after joining the ship, I quickly went back into that world. Morning routines. Work. Briefings. Discussions. Running around — sometimes literally — because on a ship, you either learn to move fast or you learn to apologise frequently. I settled into the new station. A house had to be arranged. Furniture, basic setup, the small logistics of a home that doesn't feel like a temporary camp. I won't call it romantic because it wasn't. It was administrative adulthood — the kind where you collect keys, chase signatures, fill forms, and remind yourself that this is what being “settled” looks like.

And through it all, there was running. Not dramatic running. Not ambitious running. Just running. The moment I had even a small gap in the day — early morning, late evening — I ran. Sometimes alone. Sometimes without even knowing the route. Sometimes running just to understand the new place, as if my feet could map the geography faster than my mind. Running did something for me in those days. It made the unfamiliar feel familiar. Because every new station looks strange at first. The roads don't feel like your roads. The air doesn't feel like your air. The people don't feel like your people. But when you run, the place becomes yours. Your sweat marks it. Your breath marks it. Your mind begins to recognise corners and turns and landmarks. You return to the same stretch of road again and again, and slowly it stops being “the road outside.” It becomes your route. That is one of the quiet powers of running I never fully realised until adulthood. It helps you belong. It helps you claim a place without needing permission.

While I was settling down, joining the ship, and finding a routine — my wife was back home with our daughter. We spoke regularly, of course. Phone calls, updates, small daily conversations that keep a marriage alive across distance. There were moments when I would finish a run, return sweating and calm, and then the silence would return — and I would think of my daughter's face, how she must be changing even in these few weeks. One-year-olds don't wait for you. They grow in fast-forward. Every time you see them, they are slightly different. Slightly bigger. Slightly more aware. Slightly more capable of making you feel old. Around this time, I understood something about ship life that I had known intellectually but hadn't felt emotionally until I became a father. Ship life doesn't just separate you from home. It makes you feel as if home is moving without you. Still, I didn't fall into sadness. Not because I was a superhero, but because I was busy.

Life on board keeps you occupied. It keeps you engaged. It keeps you alert. There is always some duty, some responsibility, some detail, some training requirement. On top of that, you don't want to be the officer who looks distracted. You don't want to be the officer who looks like his mind is elsewhere. You focus. You keep your professional face on. You do the work. You maintain discipline. And you run. Running became my small certainty. Because on the ship, everything else can change. Sailing schedules change. Duties change. Plans change. Weather changes. Even sleep changes. But a run — a small run — is something you can still choose. It is a small declaration of ownership over your own mind. Eventually, after about two months, my wife and daughter joined me. I still remember that feeling. A house that had been "settled" suddenly became alive. The air changed. The space changed. The evenings changed. Even the silence changed. Because silence, when you live alone, feels like emptiness. Silence, when you live with family, feels like peace.

My wife's arrival also marked another beginning — one that mattered more than we realised at the time. This was the first time she entered the ship-life phase with me. Until then, she had known me as an officer, yes. She had known the uniform. The routines. The culture. The social life. The unit environment. But she had not yet seen the real creature called a “ship posting husband.” He is physically present, but mentally scheduled. He can be home at night, but may be absent for days. He can plan an outing, but may sail suddenly. And he always carries the smell of the sea in his life — sometimes literally, sometimes emotionally. When sailing began, she saw it. Long days. Unpredictable schedules. The rhythm of a husband who is there today and not there tomorrow. The responsibility of managing the house and baby alone, without complaining too much, because in Navy life complaining is seen as weakness — and most Navy wives learn quickly to become stronger than they expected. I watched her adjust. And I respected her more for it. Because ship life tests the officer professionally, yes. But it tests the family silently. There are no medals for the wife who keeps the home running. No appreciation letters for the mother who manages a baby alone during sailing periods. No award for the person who waits without resentment. And yet, that endurance is real.

My running continued through all this. It had to. Not because I was chasing anything, but because I needed it. Running became the one habit that stayed steady even as ship life began moving fast. It helped me stay calm. It helped me stay patient. It helped me return home after duty with less anger in my body and less restlessness in my mind. And in those early ship years after the course, as my wife adjusted to the full reality of naval life and my daughter grew in her small, fast way, I realised this was the start of another long phase. A phase where life would not be neat. It would not be romantic. It would not be simple. But it would be real. And in that reality, the sea would take me away often, but running would keep bringing me back to myself.

There are two kinds of running. One is the running that happens in public. The running with a bib number, a crowd, a finish line, and a medal waiting like a reward for suffering. The kind where your effort becomes visible and therefore valid. And then there is the other kind. The running that happens quietly. Just you, your breath, and the road — and the strange need inside you that insists on moving forward even when nobody is watching. My running in those years belonged almost entirely to the second kind. It had no stage. And yet, in a strange way, it was the most important running I did.

Those were the years when life moved fast, pulling me between roles like a rope in a tug-of-war. Ship duties. Professional expectations. Family responsibilities. A growing child at home. A wife learning the reality of naval life. Everything happened at once. And running was the one thing that didn't demand an explanation. It didn't ask me to justify it. It didn't care if I had a good day or a bad day. It didn't care whether I was in the mood. It simply waited. And if I showed up, it gave me back something I couldn't get anywhere else — a sense of being intact. Ship life has a way of swallowing routines. You can have the best plan in the world, and the ship can destroy it in one signal. Sailing, duties, emergency drills, late nights, unexpected programmes — nothing follows the neat patterns your mind loves to imagine. Even sleep becomes negotiable. Even meals become opportunistic. Even Sundays become suspicious. And in such a life, running can easily disappear. Not because you don't want to run, but because you keep telling yourself the same lie: "I'll run tomorrow." Tomorrow becomes a habit. Tomorrow becomes an excuse.

And before you know it, weeks pass, and you are no longer a runner. You are simply someone who used to run. But somewhere inside me, I refused to become that man. Not because running made me special. But because I knew what

happens to me when I stop. When I stop running, my body doesn't collapse. My mind does. It becomes crowded. Noisy. Restless. I become less patient. Less steady. Less myself. So even when ship life became heavy, I kept running. Not perfectly. Not in heroic volumes. But consistently enough to keep the identity alive. Sometimes it was early morning. Sometimes it was late evening. Sometimes it was a quick run squeezed between duties, like stealing time from a system that doesn't like giving it away. Some days, I ran in a tired body. Some days, I ran in a distracted mind. Some days, I ran just because it had been too long and I couldn't bear myself any longer without that reset. And the funny thing is — the more chaotic life became, the more I needed running. Because running was the only place where the rules were simple. You start. You breathe. You keep going. That's it. No politics. No hierarchy. No performance appraisal. No explanations. Just effort.

And in the Navy, where everything else is graded and watched, effort that doesn't need validation becomes priceless. Running on a ship posting also teaches you creativity. Because your route is not always a lovely tree-lined track with good air and soft ground. Sometimes your route is a dockyard road with more dust than oxygen. Sometimes your route is a narrow stretch near the harbour where you have to dodge vehicles, stray dogs, and the occasional group of men who look at you as if you are running away from a crime scene. Sometimes your route is a place where the smell of the sea mixes with the smell of fuel, and you tell yourself that this is "fresh air" because you want to remain optimistic. And if you are sailing, then running becomes a different kind of game altogether. You can't always run the way you run on land. Sometimes there is space, sometimes there isn't. Sometimes the deck is open, sometimes it's operational. Sometimes the weather helps, sometimes the weather tries to kill you. But in those moments, you do what runners do best. You adjust. If you can't run far, you run short. If you can't run outside,

you run inside. If you can't run properly, you do some kind of movement that convinces your mind that you are still the same person.

Runners understand something non-runners often don't: Running is not an activity. It is a relationship. And relationships survive through contact, not through intention. I also realised something else during this phase. Running doesn't always make life easier. Sometimes it makes it harder because you are tired and still have to do your duties. Sometimes you finish a run and your wife needs help at home, and you are drenched, sweating, pretending you are alive. Sometimes you return from a run and your child has decided that this is the perfect moment to demand your full attention, and you can't say, "Kiddo, let me recover first," because children do not respect recovery. Sometimes you run when you should be resting. Sometimes you rest when you should be running. But the point is: you keep trying. And slowly, running starts doing something quietly magical. It stops being a separate activity. It becomes part of your personality. People begin recognising you through it. Not with loud compliments, but with small remarks. "Sir, aap toh roz daudte ho." "Sir, you are always running." "Sir, you should participate in this event."

In those years, I was not the best runner in the Navy. Not even close. The Navy is full of freakishly fit people — men who seem to run with the same ease others walk to the canteen. But I was consistent. And in uniformed life, consistency earns respect. Most people can do an intense effort once. Very few can repeat moderate effort every day without drama. That became my style. No podiums. No speeches. Just showing up. There is a quiet humility in being an ordinary runner in a world full of extraordinary ones. You don't have the luxury of ego. You don't get to hide behind medals. All you have is discipline. And discipline, I learnt, is underrated. In those years, running also became a strange bridge between my different worlds. At home,

it kept me stable. When I came back after duty, tired and irritated, running gave me somewhere to pour out the irritation, so I didn't pour it at home. When I was stressed, it calmed me. When I was low, it lifted me. And when I was happy, it made me even happier, because happiness and running combine very well. At work, it kept me sharp. There is something about regular running that makes you feel mentally cleaner. Not smarter — cleaner. Your thoughts don't stick. Your anger doesn't settle. Your mind moves. And on a ship, where pressure comes in small waves daily, a moving mind is a survival advantage. And perhaps most importantly, running reminded me that I was still me. Because in those years, roles were multiplying fast. I was an officer. I was a husband. I was a father. I was serving on board ships again. I was expected to perform professionally without excuses. I was expected to be present emotionally at home without being tired. I was expected to manage everything without appearing to struggle.

In all of that, it is easy to lose yourself. Not in a dramatic way. In a quiet way. You wake up one day and realise your life has become only duty, only expectation, only responsibility. You are functioning, but you are not fully living. Running protected me from that. It gave me one small space where I was not performing for anyone. Where I was not being assessed. Where I was not being watched. Where I was not “Sir” or “Officer” or “Husband” or “Father.” I was simply a man moving forward on a road, listening to my breath, letting my mind settle. Sometimes I ran without music. Sometimes I ran with nothing but sea air and silence. Sometimes I ran and imagined conversations I would have. Sometimes I ran and emptied my mind completely, as if the road were taking away the clutter one kilometre at a time.

And yes, some days I ran only because I didn't know what else to do with myself. But even that was enough. Because running doesn't ask for the perfect reason. It only asks for

honesty. You show up with whatever you have. And it meets you there. If there is one thing I learnt in those years, it is this: You don't need a race to be a runner. You don't need an audience to be disciplined. You don't need a finish line to keep moving. Sometimes, the truest running happens when nobody sees it. When there is no celebration. When there is no validation. When the run exists only as a quiet act of self-respect. That was my running then. Ordinary. Unnoticed. Unrewarded. And yet, it held everything together.

If ship life was a demanding teacher, fatherhood was a silent one. It didn't shout. It didn't threaten. It didn't announce results. It just... changed you. Quietly. Not in one dramatic moment, but in small scenes that kept repeating until you realised something inside you had shifted permanently. When my elder daughter was little, life didn't feel like a grand story. It felt like a series of ordinary moments stitched together — feeding schedules, naps, small cries, sudden smiles, and that soft baby smell, which I still believe should be bottled and sold as medicine for stressed men. In those years, I wasn't chasing anything heroic. I was learning something more difficult. I was learning to be present. And presence is harder than effort. Effort is simple. You push, you grind, you finish. Presence demands softness. It demands patience. It demands attention even when your mind is tired. It demands that you show up not with strength but with calm. And calm, I learnt, is not my natural talent. Not because I am an angry man, but because I have always had energy. Restlessness. Movement. A mind that runs even when the legs are still. It's the kind of wiring that works well in uniformed life. But it can be clumsy in fatherhood. Babies don't care that you are an officer. They don't salute your rank. They don't respect your fatigue. They don't understand that you had duty all night and therefore deserve sleep. They simply exist with full honesty. They want what they want when they want it. And if they don't get it, they inform the whole neighbourhood.

At that age, my daughter was the same. Some days, she would look at me as if I were the most fascinating thing in the world — a large, moving object that made funny noises. Other days, she would treat me like a stranger who had come to disturb her peace. Both were humbling experiences. In the Navy, you are trained to look confident even when you are unsure. You are trained to give instructions. You are trained to “handle situations.” At home, your baby is the situation. And she doesn’t handle easily. The first time I tried to hold her properly, I held her like a fragile parcel — the kind with “HANDLE WITH CARE” written all over it. I was stiff, cautious and overthinking every movement. My wife looked at me the way instructors look at a trainee about to do something wrong. “Support the neck,” she would say, as if I were holding a weapon. And I would nod seriously and adjust my grip as if I were following a drill sequence. Sometimes I would rock her too hard. Sometimes too slowly. Sometimes I would try to sing — and quickly realise that some gifts are best left undiscovered.

And then there were those tiny moments that hit you unexpectedly. Like when she fell asleep on my shoulder. A baby sleeping on your shoulder is not just a baby sleeping. It’s trust. It’s surrender. It’s that small, warm weight that says, without words: You are safe enough. The first time she did that, I remember standing still, afraid to move even an inch. It felt like the world had become fragile. Like the laws of physics had softened. Like even breathing too loudly might disturb this perfect peace. Of course, the peace never lasted. Babies have a sixth sense. They know exactly when you are comfortable. That is the moment they wake up. But even those short seconds were enough. They stayed with you. And then there were the homecoming moments. Every working parent knows it. But in the Navy, the gaps are sometimes longer, sharper. You leave for sailing, you return after days or weeks, and the child has changed. Not dramatically, not like a movie montage. But enough that it

stings. The face looks slightly different. The expressions are new. The voice sounds different. The movement is more confident. And you realise you missed a phase that will never come back. I used to experience that with a strange mix of joy and guilt. Joy, because my daughter was growing beautifully. Because she was healthy. Because she was becoming her own little person. Guilt, because I was not there for every small milestone.

Sometimes I would return, and my wife would casually tell me, “She started doing this,” or “She said this,” or “She walked like this,” and I would smile and pretend it was normal. But inside, something would pinch. Because fathers want to be present for firsts. And ship life doesn’t always allow that. I learnt to find my fatherhood in the moments I did have. Not the grand milestones. The small scenes. Like the way she would look at me when I came home, trying to recognise me through her baby logic. Like the way she would crawl or toddle towards me, uncertain at first, then faster, as if she suddenly remembered that I belonged to her world. Like the way she would hold my finger tightly with her tiny hand, and in that grip there was a seriousness that didn’t match her size. Like the way she would laugh at the simplest things — a face, a sound, a silly gesture — and I would realise adults don’t laugh enough, and maybe that is why we suffer.

Some evenings, after a long day, I would be exhausted. Duty fatigue isn’t only physical; it is mental. It feels as if your brain has been running without shoes. You reach home and want quiet. But home doesn’t give you quiet. Home gives you life. A baby doesn’t care that you want silence. She wants interaction. She wants attention. She wants you to be real, not merely present. And I would sit with her. Sometimes I would play. Sometimes I would just watch her. Sometimes I would hold her while she looked around at the world as if she had just arrived yesterday. And I would feel something soften in me. It’s strange — running

made me stronger, yes. But fatherhood made me gentler. And that gentleness was not weakness. It was growth.

Even my wife, in those years, changed. She became tougher in ways I hadn't fully understood until I watched her live through ship routines. Managing the home, the baby, the loneliness, the uncertainty — all of it without making it dramatic. Navy wives don't have medals. But they deserve them. They run their own marathons every day, without training plans and without finish lines. And my wife ran hers quietly. The baby would fall sick; she handled it. I would be away; she handled it. Some days she would be tired; she still handled it. And in that silent strength, I learnt something important: that while I was proud of my running discipline, there were forms of endurance that looked nothing like running. They looked like patience. They looked like routine. They looked like showing up at home every day and doing the same things again and again.

In those years, I also began to understand why my running mattered beyond me. Because when you become a father, your body stops being only your own. It becomes an asset. A responsibility. A tool. You start caring about staying healthy not because you want abs, but because you want to be present in your child's life for as long as possible. You want to be strong enough to carry her when she's tired. Fast enough to chase her when she runs. Fit enough not to be a burden. And yes, sometimes you also want to be fit enough to impress her slightly when she grows up and asks, "Papa, can you run fast?" At that time, my daughter didn't know what running meant. But she knew what energy meant. She knew what presence meant. She knew what safety meant. And those were the things I wanted to give her.

There were days when I went for a run early in the morning and returned home to find her still asleep. I would stand at the door and watch her for a moment — small, peaceful, unaware of how hard adults work to protect that peace. And I would think:

This is why we do it. Not for medals. Not for praise. Not even for ambition. For this. For these small scenes that feel ordinary while they are happening — but later, when you look back, become the most precious parts of life. Fatherhood taught me that you don't need grand moments to feel meaning. You need consistency. You need to stay. You need to return. And in a strange way, it felt familiar. Because that is exactly what running taught me too. You don't become a runner in one day. You become a runner by showing up again and again — especially on days when you don't feel like it. Fatherhood, I realised, is the same. You don't become a father the day your child is born. You become a father in the thousand small scenes that follow. And somewhere in those scenes, without effort or announcement, I became steadier.

There are some things the Navy gives you that no civilian job ever can. Rank. Uniform. Travel. Discipline. All that is obvious. But the real gift — the one nobody talks about in speeches — is this: You are never truly alone. Even when you feel lonely, even when you are exhausted, even when life is heavy, there is always someone around you who understands the weight without asking you to explain it. And that understanding is rare in the outside world. In those years as ship life gathered speed again, I realised the Navy's biggest strength was not its steel ships or its powerful systems. It was its people. It looks glamorous from the outside. A warship. The sea. The uniform. The idea of adventure. But inside the ship, behind the smart photographs, there is a different reality. The long hours. The constant readiness. The training. The duties. The constant movement between "everything is normal" and "everything can change in five minutes."

And it's in that demanding, unromantic reality that you start leaning on the people around you without even knowing it. Your colleagues, seniors, juniors, coursemates and shipmates. They become your second family — sometimes better than a family,

because they don't need emotional conversations to understand your state. They can see it on your face. They can hear it in your voice. They can sense it in your silence. And they respond in the only language the Navy respects deeply: Humour. Because in the armed forces, humour is not entertainment. Humour is survival. It is the pressure valve that keeps men from exploding under the weight of constant duty. Ship humour is a special category. It is not gentle. It is not polite. It is not designed to protect your feelings. It is designed to remind you that you are not special. Which is a gift. If you walk into the wardroom looking tired, you won't get sympathy. And you'll laugh — not because it's hilarious, but because it is true, and the truth feels lighter when spoken like a joke. Onboard, you also learn quickly that your rank might make you "Sir" officially, but your personality will decide what you are in real life. If you are a reasonable officer, your juniors will respect you and still tease you. If you are harsh, they will respect you even more — and tease you behind your back. Either way, you don't escape. This equality of teasing is probably the Navy's most democratic system.

I had my gang in those years — the kind of colleagues who turn an ordinary evening into something memorable without trying too hard. Some were seniors who carried the relaxed confidence of experience. The kind who could teach you a lesson in one sentence and make you laugh in the same breath. Some were my coursemates — men who knew exactly what kind of nonsense I was capable of because they had seen it for years. Some were juniors who were hungry, energetic, and slightly overconfident — which is how every junior officer should be, because without overconfidence, you don't survive the first few years. And in every group, there is always at least one man whose main job in life is to say the wrong thing at the wrong time. That man is important. He keeps the rest of you humble. Even in serious environments like ships, where responsibility is real and consequences are not theoretical, there are moments when

laughter becomes the only way to breathe. Like when the ship is preparing to sail and everyone is running around as if their lives depend on it, and someone suddenly says something stupid like: “Sir, relax. The sea has been there for centuries. It will wait.”

The brotherhood also showed itself in small ways. The way someone would quietly cover for you when you needed to rush home. The way someone would tell you, “Go, I’ll handle this,” without making it sound like a favour. The way a senior would look at you and say, “You’re doing fine,” and that one sentence would feel like an award because the Navy doesn’t give praise easily. In those years, I was also building a reputation — not as the smartest officer or the most brilliant sailor or the most charismatic leader. My reputation was simpler. I was the runner. The one who always ran. The one who somehow found time to run even when everyone else was collapsing into their beds. The one who would show up sweaty in the morning, looking annoyingly fresh. This became a running joke — literally. Some admired it, some mocked it, and some looked at me as if I were mentally disturbed. Honestly, all three reactions were correct.

On a ship posting, especially during heavy schedules, running feels like a luxury. The idea of “fitness time” sounds like a foreign concept. Most people are just trying to survive the day and get some sleep. When they saw me running, they couldn’t understand it. Why are you running, man? Where are you going? Who is chasing you? And sometimes even I didn’t have a clear answer. But that’s the thing — a habit becomes your identity long before it becomes your explanation. I remember some mornings when I ran early — very early — because later there would be duties. And when I returned, someone would be sipping tea and look at me with the kind of judgement usually reserved for criminals. “Sir... you ran? At this time?” And I would say something unintelligent like, “Yes.” And he would shake his head slowly, as if grieving.

I also remember that there was a strange respect for running in uniformed life. Even if people didn't do it, they respected those who did. Because running is hard. It is simple, but it is hard. And simple, hard things earn respect in the armed forces. You cannot cheat a run. You cannot negotiate with a run. You cannot "manage" a run with clever talk. You either do it or you don't. So even the laziest officer respects the runner — not openly, but secretly. What I also liked about the brotherhood was that nobody let you over-romanticise your struggles. If you were tired, they didn't say, "Oh poor you." They said, "Welcome to ship life." If you were stressed, they said, "Drink tea." If you were angry, they said, "Calm down." If you were sad, they said, "Common, don't make it dramatic." It sounds harsh. But it keeps you steady. Because sometimes, when life becomes heavy, you don't need someone to validate your pain. You need someone to stop you from drowning in it. That is what shipmates do. They don't pull you out with poetry. They pull you out with practical brutality. And you feel grateful for it.

Even the wardroom had its own strange magic. It is not just where you eat. It's where you decompress. Where rumours travel faster than signals. Where officers suddenly become comedians, philosophers, and strategic analysts — depending on how strong the tea is that day. Some evenings, after a long day, I would sit in the wardroom and listen to conversations — not participate, just listen. And I would feel that familiar sense of belonging. Because no matter which ship you are on, the feeling is the same. The wardroom sounds the same. The banter sounds the same. The tired laughter sounds the same. The complaints sound the same. The friendships sound the same. It is like a moving village that travels with you from posting to posting.

And in that village, everyone is carrying something. Some are carrying family worries. Some are carrying career anxieties. Some are carrying their own personal grief. Some are carrying nothing

— those are dangerous people, because they usually create trouble. But everybody is carrying something. And the beauty is that nobody has to announce it. You just know. So, you sit together. You eat together. You laugh together. You survive together. There is also a subtle emotional comfort in knowing that when you go to sea, you don't go alone. You go with men who will do their duty with you, stand watch with you, and joke with you even when they are exhausted. And when you return home after long duty days, even if your house feels heavy or your mind feels tired, you know there are men on that ship who understand you in a way nobody else can. That knowledge doesn't solve every problem. But it makes problems bearable.

Looking back, I think the brotherhood did something important for me. It kept me from becoming too serious. It's easy to become serious when you're trying to be responsible. It's easy to become tight. It's easy to become rigid. It's easy to start believing your own importance. But the Navy doesn't allow that for long. Your shipmates will correct you. With humour, with jokes, with mockery, or with affection disguised as insults. And you learn to laugh again. You learn not to take yourself too seriously. And that, I think, is one of the greatest survival skills in adult life. Because life becomes heavy in the 30s — responsibilities, roles, expectations. And if you lose your humour, you lose your ability to breathe. I kept running. They kept joking. And between my running and their humour, I stayed light enough to keep going. Not always happy. Not always fresh. But steady. And in a life like ship life, steadiness is not ordinary. It is heroic — quietly, invisibly, without applause.

There are phases of life that are easy to write about — the dramatic ones. The ones where the storyline practically writes itself: a tough course, a hard decision, a big failure, a big comeback. You can point to a moment and say, "That is where everything changed." And then there are the other years — the

regular ones. The years where nothing “big” happens, but everything important is quietly forming in the background. Those were the years I was living through. If someone had asked me back then, “How is life?” I would probably have answered with the most boring and respectable sentence in existence: “Fine, sir.” From the outside, life looked stable. The course was done, ship life had resumed, the family was settling into a rhythm, and running had continued in its stubborn, predictable way. There was no dramatic peak and no deep valley — just a long stretch of road that didn’t look special until you realised how much it was shaping you.

Ship life progressed with its familiar appetite. It doesn’t care about your personal story. It cares about your readiness. It cares about competence. It cares about your ability to function even when you are tired. In the beginning, the sea always feels like a romance — sunsets, salty air, the sense of being part of something larger. But romance doesn’t survive long inside a schedule. The sea quickly turns into routine: duties, watchkeeping, drills, deadlines that don’t wait for your mood, and days that begin early and end late without asking permission. It wasn’t glamorous. It was simply what the Navy demanded — and I had no choice but to become the kind of man who could meet those demands without drama.

At home, life had its own kind of training. Fatherhood doesn’t announce itself loudly; it slowly rearranges your priorities without consulting you. You think time is measured in leave periods and sailing schedules, and suddenly you begin measuring it in smaller things — how quickly your daughter grows, how rapidly her habits change, how each week she becomes more aware and more expressive. A child doesn’t just grow in height; she grows into your mind. She begins occupying your thoughts in the most ordinary ways — even when you are standing on a

ship, even when you are working, even when you are “busy,” a part of you is still thinking about her.

My wife was learning something too — something nobody formally teaches, but every naval wife eventually masters. She was experiencing ship-life separation properly for the first time, the kind where the husband isn’t just away at work but away from the rhythm of home. She had to manage the house, the baby, the endless small tasks that keep life running, and the quiet loneliness that follows when the day ends and you’re still doing everything alone. She didn’t complain much. Most Navy wives don’t. They just adjust. And watching her adjust, I felt a respect that was not loud or sentimental — just steady. She wasn’t doing anything “heroic,” but she was doing the ordinary things repeatedly, without applause. And that, I realised, is a tougher kind of endurance than most people understand.

Professionally, those years were not about big achievements; they were about becoming steady. Work kept me occupied, as it always does on ships. You do your duties, manage your responsibilities, stay sharp, keep learning, and keep your face calm even when the day has been long. You begin to realise that adulthood isn’t only about capability — it’s about consistency. And consistency is not built on motivation; it is built on routine. Nobody applauds routine. Nobody celebrates it. But routine is what keeps a man together when life is pulling him in too many directions.

Amid all this, there was running — not as a headline, not as a heroic act, but as a quiet thread holding everything together. Running didn’t solve my professional demands, and it didn’t automatically make me a better husband or father. But it kept me stable on the inside. When I ran, my mind became less crowded. When I ran, my body felt clean and lighter, as if some invisible tension had drained out through sweat. When I ran, I returned to my life calmer than I had left it. That small difference

mattered more than I realised at the time, because adult life isn't always destroyed by one big crisis. Sometimes it's destroyed by slow leakage — a man becoming irritable every day, impatient every week, emotionally absent while physically present. Running protected me from that slow leakage. It kept me honest. It kept me grounded. It reminded me that even if life was full of schedules, I still had one corner of my life that belonged only to effort and solitude.

Humour helped too — without it, ship life becomes too heavy. Mess conversations, shipmate banter, the casual teasing, the jokes that look cruel from the outside but feel like affection inside — they were all part of the same survival kit. In the Navy, humour is not entertainment; it is pressure relief. It stops you from taking yourself too seriously. It stops you from believing your own importance. It reminds you that everyone is tired, everyone is carrying something, and the only way to survive with dignity is to laugh while you can.

When I look back now, those years weren't the "most exciting" of my life. They were not defined by peak ambition. They weren't built around a dream, like the diving course or the commando course. But they were a foundation. These were the years when I stopped chasing an identity and started living one. I wasn't trying to prove I was tough. I was learning to be steady. I wasn't chasing greatness. I was building continuity. And continuity, I realised, is underrated. It is easy to celebrate a dramatic comeback. It is harder to respect the quiet continuation — showing up again and again when there is no applause, no finish line, no medal waiting at the end of the week.

I did not know it then, but these ordinary years were teaching me something important: life does not always test you through big events. Sometimes it tests you through repetition — the same duties, the same responsibilities, the same effort, day after day, week after week. And if you can stay steady through repetition,

you become stronger without even noticing it. You build a kind of endurance that is not visible, but it holds you together when life turns harsh again.

At that time, I thought life would continue like this — stable, predictable, controlled. I thought my body would always cooperate if my mind stayed disciplined. I thought running would always remain quietly in the background, like a loyal friend who never leaves. But life is never that obedient. It allows you peace only long enough to forget that peace is temporary. And somewhere beyond these steady years — quietly waiting like an ambush — was a moment that would remind me again that endurance is not something you build once and keep forever. A man can run for years without trouble, and still, in one instant, life can demand a completely new kind of strength.

PART-3

CHAPTER 13

Running, Interrupted

“Injury is the price of progress.” - Sebastian Coe

05 August 2008 began like any other day on the ship — the kind of day that doesn’t deserve a separate memory slot in your mind. It was routine work, routine movement, routine responsibility, and the usual feeling of being on your feet for so many hours that you stop recognising tiredness as a problem and start accepting it as a default setting. By around five in the evening, I remember telling myself I was done for the day and should head home before something new came up, because on ships, if you don’t leave when you can, you end up leaving when you can’t.

I had no intention of playing football that day. In fact, I didn’t even want to be near the field. The previous day, I had been on duty, and duty has a peculiar way of hollowing you out — not dramatically, but like a slow leak, where you still look normal from the outside but inside you’re just waiting to sit down and stop being a responsible man for a few hours. The plan for that evening was simple: go home, eat, watch something mindless, maybe spend time with my wife and daughter, and sleep like a man who had earned it.

But somewhere between deciding to go home and actually reaching home, I made a mistake that, at the time, didn’t even register as a mistake. The ship’s football team was out for practice for the upcoming championship, and though I was part of the team, I couldn’t make it that day because work kept me tied down. As I started my drive back home, I thought of taking a

quick detour to see how the boys were doing. That was the entire intention — to watch the team for a minute or two and then continue on my way, like someone who doesn't get distracted by sporting emotions.

Except, the moment when I reached the field and saw them playing, whatever passed for my maturity quietly disappeared. They were playing a practice match against another ship's team, and they were not doing well. Not "bad" in the heartbreaking sense, but bad in that irritating, disorganised way where too many men are doing too many things at once, and none of it makes sense. I stood there for a couple of minutes thinking I would walk away, but instead I found myself getting more restless. I could see exactly what was going wrong, and I also knew — with the kind of confidence only foolish men possess — that if I stepped in for a while, things would look better.

I told myself the sentence that has ruined many lives in many forms: I'll play for a bit and then go home. Just for a while. Just to organise. Just to bring some structure to the mess. The funny part was that I hadn't even carried my gear. No boots, no shorts, no T-shirt, nothing. I had come like a man going home, not like a man entering a field. But once the decision was made, the Navy brain activated its favourite skill: improvisation. I borrowed everything — boots, shorts, a ship-coloured T-shirt — the whole costume — from one of the boys, and in the moment, it didn't even feel awkward. It felt normal. Like I belonged there.

Within minutes I was doing what I always did in situations like this: organising. Calling out instructions, pulling people into positions, shouting at the right moments, and chasing when required. It wasn't ego, not exactly. It was habit — that instinct that doesn't allow you to watch things fall apart. And for a few minutes, it actually felt good. The body loosened up, the mind switched off from ship work, and the game became a small world where the only problems were solvable by effort.

Somewhere in the middle of all this, I had the ball at my feet. I was moving forward, scanning for a pass, aware of shouting from behind, aware of space in front, and feeling a strange satisfaction that I had stepped in at the right time. And then I saw this one guy from the other team charging towards me as if he had been personally instructed by his ancestors to bring me down. He was running hard and shouting loudly, “Isko to chodna mat (Don’t let him get by)!” And before I could do anything sensible — pass, shift, brace, or simply step away — he came in with a rough tackle. In one instant, I felt my right knee twist violently to the right, almost as if it had been pulled beyond its limit, and then snap back as if trying to return to sanity. And then I was down.

I didn’t fall in a dramatic way. There was no heroic roll, no theatrical clutching of the leg. It was just an immediate collapse, the body refusing to cooperate, the mind not understanding what had happened. The first thought that came into my head — the automatic, comforting lie every sportsman tells himself — was that it was a sprain. A bad one, maybe, but a sprain. Something that would hurt for a few days, swell a bit, and then gradually settle down. You ice it. You rest it. You walk it off.

I tried to get up. I tried to put weight on the leg. Pain shot through like a warning signal, sharp enough to make my stomach tighten. I could walk, but only with a limp, and I told the boys to continue playing because even then, my brain was behaving like a training officer. “Play sensibly,” I told them. “Organise the defence.” As if leadership could fix the bone.

Then I did the next foolish thing — I drove myself home. The knee was unstable and the pain was there, but I convinced myself that it was manageable and I just wanted to sit down. My house was on the first floor, and I climbed those stairs carefully, one step at a time, holding the railing, pretending I wasn’t injured. Once inside, I changed, sat down, put ice on the knee, switched

on the TV, and waited, genuinely believing that in a day or two, things would be fine. When my wife returned from the park with my daughter, she looked at me and instantly sensed something was wrong. I brushed it off, the way men do when they don't want worry in the house. "Don't worry," I said. "Kuch nahi hai... ye sab hota rehta hai khel mein (Nothing major...these things happen during games)."

Within a few hours, the knee stiffened in a way that didn't feel normal. The swelling came on fast and aggressively, the joint ballooning to an unnatural size, as if the body had decided to express its protest externally. Sitting there with an ice pack and the TV murmuring in the background, I felt something shift inside me — not panic, just fear. Because I suddenly understood a simple truth I hadn't grasped on the field: this was not a sprain, and it wasn't going to fix itself politely overnight. I called a coursemate and asked him to drive me to the hospital. I don't remember the exact words because men like me don't know how to ask for help gracefully when pain is involved; we disguise it as an instruction, as if that protects our ego. Even the short car ride felt longer than it should have, every bump on the road sending a reminder to the joint, and I kept telling myself that once the doctor saw it, an injection would be given and life would return to normal. That is what the mind does when it is scared. It bargains with reality by pretending the solution is simple.

The doctor examined the knee, assessed the swelling and stiffness, asked a couple of questions, and sent me for an X-ray. I remember lying on the gurney, staring at the ceiling, still holding on to the neat story in my head: a bad twist, a bad sprain, a few days of rest. Fractures belonged to accidents and falls, not to a football tackle on an ordinary evening. When the doctor came back, he said it calmly: I had a fracture. A fracture of the tibia. I argued with him, offended by the word, telling him it couldn't be possible because it had been just a twist. But the X-ray doesn't

care about your logic. He told me I needed to be admitted, and I tried to refuse out of habit. I told him I was the only one looking after my department on the ship, that I couldn't afford to stay in hospital, that this would create problems. In hindsight, it sounds ridiculous, but when you're trained to believe that duty is everything, even pain feels like an inconvenience you should manage quietly.

The doctor admitted me anyway. My coursemate went back home to collect my clothes and toiletries. That small detail — someone else packing your things because you cannot — is one of those moments that doesn't look tragic from the outside but feels unsettling from within. I lay there in the hospital bed, still telling myself this was temporary, still expecting the night to pass and the knee to settle. But the night did not settle. The pain increased, not gradually like soreness but aggressively, like pressure, as if something inside the leg was pushing outward and downward, tightening with every hour. They gave me painkillers, one injection after another, and I lost count somewhere after the fifth or sixth. The hospital remained clinical and indifferent, but inside my leg the pain kept rising as if it had its own plan. I could not sleep. I could barely rest. And at some point, I realised this was not the kind of injury you tough out with discipline.

The next morning, the specialist came in. He asked me a few questions, examined the leg, and said a small procedure needed to be done immediately. I was wheeled into the operating theatre, and the surrealness of it hit me again: less than twenty-four hours ago I was borrowing someone's boots, and now I was lying under bright lights, watching masked faces move around as if this were routine. The specialist performed a procedure. Later, he explained that there had been internal bleeding, and the collected blood had created pressure inside the leg, pressing against nerves and amplifying the pain. When he drained it, the

pain didn't vanish, but the intensity softened slightly, like a storm that retreats but doesn't leave.

After that, the cast was applied. A proper one. Once the plaster hardened, movement became impossible, and with that impossibility came another kind of reality: there was no more pretending. A cast is the body's declaration of surrender. It tells you plainly that your leg will no longer participate in your optimism. Somewhere during all this, the specialist noticed something I hadn't paid attention to. He asked me to move my ankle upward, and I tried. Nothing happened. I tried again, harder. Still nothing. His expression changed slightly — not dramatic, just thoughtful — and that was when the fear deepened. A fracture is frightening but understandable. Bone breaks, bone heals. But when the foot doesn't respond to your brain's instruction, you don't feel injured anymore. You feel compromised.

He explained that this would need to be assessed by a reconstructive surgeon, and that such facilities were not available at that hospital. I was being transferred to a bigger hospital in another city. Normally that should feel reassuring. That day, it felt like a confirmation that something serious had happened. I travelled by train with attendants, my casted leg awkward and heavy, every jolt reminding me that the body is not designed to be carried like luggage. Inside my head, questions kept circling: will I walk properly again, will I run again, what happens to my career if this doesn't heal well?

In the bigger hospital, I was admitted for around fifteen days. Those days felt longer than they should have, because hospital time is a strange kind of time. Days repeat, nights stay too quiet. You begin measuring life in doctor rounds and medicine schedules. Different doctors examined the leg, asked me to move the ankle, tested reflexes, made notes, and conferred among themselves in language that sounded reassuring but wasn't fully

understandable. Somewhere in those discussions, I heard a phrase I would later remember clearly: deep peroneal nerve palsy. At the time, it was just another medical term, but I could sense its weight from the way it was spoken. The plan remained brutally simple: wait. Wait for the cast to come off. Wait for the bone to settle. Wait to see whether the nerve would recover. There was nothing heroic to do, no effort that would accelerate healing. Just waiting, which for a runner is the most painful activity of all.

It was during those fifteen days that a small absurdity entered my life. The room had a TV, but the remote wasn't working. The Beijing Olympics were on. And because I couldn't move freely and couldn't change channels without help, I ended up watching the Olympics as if it were my personal responsibility to witness human excellence while my own leg lay trapped in plaster. I watched everything — sports I didn't even know existed, events I would never voluntarily choose. It was quietly cruel, because while the world's best athletes were flying, sprinting and swimming on screen, I was lying there learning how fragile the body actually is.

After those days, I was sent back on sick leave with instructions that felt both hopeful and terrifying. Physiotherapy would begin once the plaster was removed. Electrical stimulation would be tried. Recovery would be monitored. Reviews would be regular. And somewhere in that clinical plan, a word appeared that I had never thought would be associated with me: disability. I was given a disability classification, and though the doctors spoke about it clinically, the word felt like a personal insult. I came back home on sick leave with the cast still on, and for the first time in years my days became strangely empty. Not peaceful-empty, but the kind that feels unnatural because your body is supposed to be moving and it simply isn't. Those four weeks were a slow crawl. I tried to keep myself occupied, but every

small act felt like a reminder that my body had lost its easy relationship with movement.

After those four weeks, I reported back to the hospital again. I held on to a simple hope — that once the cast came off, everything would start improving rapidly. It was a comforting fantasy, and like most comforting fantasies, it was about to be exposed. When the cast was finally removed, the leg looked unfamiliar, almost embarrassing. Weak in a quiet, humiliating way. The relief of having the plaster off lasted only a few minutes, because almost immediately I realised that freedom doesn't automatically mean function. The reconstructive surgeon examined me. He checked the joint, asked questions, tested movements, and then asked me to stand up and walk. The instruction sounded simple, almost insulting, because walking is the most basic thing a human being does. I got up carefully, took a few steps — and realised my body had forgotten the rhythm. I wasn't walking properly. I wasn't walking straight. It was awkward and hesitant, like a man learning to be human again.

Then he asked me to run. It sounds almost comedic when you narrate it later, but in the moment, it was quietly devastating. I tried to jog a few steps, but what came out was not running, not even jogging. It was a strange, lopsided movement that felt like my body had been reassembled incorrectly. The ankle didn't lift naturally. The gait looked wrong, and it felt wrong. A thought landed inside me with brutal clarity: Oh God, I am done! The surgeon didn't react emotionally. He simply explained the next phase: physiotherapy, electrical stimulation, slow strengthening, retraining movement patterns, regular reviews. A sensible plan, but underneath it I heard the real message: time will test you.

I began physiotherapy again with that dull, stubborn obedience that comes from military life. Exercises that looked too small to matter. Electrical impulses that made the muscles twitch. There was pain, yes, but the deeper frustration was the

slowness. Running had taught me endurance, but this was endurance without distance. Endurance measured in degrees of movement and the ability to lift your foot a little higher than yesterday. By then I had reached a strange mental point where I was no longer afraid of the diagnosis as much as I was tired of the hospital itself. A hospital is a place where your identity shrinks into one label: patient. I wanted my life back, even if it came with a limp and uncertainty.

The specialist wanted to keep me longer and continue physio there. Medically, it probably made perfect sense. Emotionally, I was done. I told him I could do the physio and electrical stimulation at my posting station and return for reviews when required. It took some convincing, but he agreed. He discharged me with a plan and asked me to report again after six months. Somehow, I also managed to convince him to send me back to the ship. The ship knew me. The ship understood me. The people there had seen me running, playing, sweating, working. I needed familiar ground and familiar faces — a place where I could be treated like an officer again, not like fragile cargo with indifferent eyes.

When I returned to the ship, the reaction was exactly what you would expect on a platform that runs on duty rosters and manpower tables. People were glad to see me back, not just out of kindness. There was a shortage of officers, and my department needed someone to take charge. I threw myself into work almost compulsively. Work and physiotherapy became the two pillars of my day, and everything else was pushed into a distant corner of my mind. Those months felt long in a way that only recovery can. I was functioning, yes, but emotionally I was still stuck at that football ground, still replaying a tackle I never even wanted to face. From the outside, I probably looked normal. Inside, there was a dull dissatisfaction because running had been removed from my life. Even walking was effort now, a conscious act. And

when walking itself became uncertain, the idea of running felt almost unrealistic, like asking too much from a body that had already made it clear it would not cooperate easily.

By April 2009, it was time for yet another review. The doctors examined me, checked my movement, and looked for improvement, then said they wanted to observe me for another six months. Another six months. It wasn't discouraging exactly, but it wasn't comforting either. It was a sentence without emotion: you have improved, but not enough; you may improve, but we cannot promise it; we will watch and wait. I came back and kept walking more. My gait improved slowly — by gait I mean the simple rhythm of walking, the way the body moves when it isn't trying to impress anyone. It became less awkward, less forced, slightly more natural. But even then, I had no idea what running would look like. Running is not just faster walking. Running is impact. Running is trust.

And yet, somewhere during one of those walks, the thought arrived. What if I try a little? I looked around, almost like a thief about to steal a private moment, and decided to jog for a few steps. My form was odd, my foot wasn't perfect, and my confidence was fragile, but I told myself the only sentence that mattered: Fuck it! If I can run at all, that will be enough. I ran — only about two hundred or three hundred metres. A distance that wouldn't qualify as a warm-up in the older version of my life. But when I stopped, I felt relief. Proof that running was still somewhere inside me, even if it had returned with a limp and a warning sign. From that day onward, I began doing little bits of it whenever I could, not to train, not to build fitness, but simply to remind myself that I hadn't been permanently exiled from the one thing that made sense to me. I wanted to do a little more, little by little, before my next review in October 2009.

In October 2009, the verdict came. They said the disability would remain permanent and affect things, including career

prospects. It should have hit me like lightning. It didn't. By then, something had shifted. I had started running again, even if only in fragments. A permanent disability sounded heavy on paper, but inside me another thought had already taken root, calm and stubborn: Fine. Let it be permanent. As long as I am running in some form, I will manage.

That year taught me a strange lesson. I didn't need to be fully repaired to feel whole again. I didn't need a perfect gait to feel like myself. I didn't need the doctors' approval to feel alive. All I needed was that small, stubborn return of movement — the ability to place one foot ahead of the other, not as a patient, not as a case file, but as a runner. And once that thought settled into me, the next phase of my life became almost inevitable. If I couldn't run like before, I would run in a new way. If I couldn't chase speed, I would chase consistency. If the body was going to demand patience, I would give it patience in kilometres. Because one thing had become clear by then: running wasn't something I did when life allowed it. Running was what I did so life remained possible.

CHAPTER 14

Disability, Meets Stubbornness

“It is not the strength of the body that counts, but the strength of the spirit.” -J. R. R. Tolkien

2009 had begun on a high note — the kind you announce to the world, the kind that quietly reshaped my life at home. We welcomed a new addition to our family, our second daughter, and suddenly the house felt fuller in ways that had nothing to do with space. There was more noise, more laughter, more tiny demands at odd hours, and an unfamiliar kind of happiness that arrived without asking for permission. Even amid sleep deprivation and the usual chaos that comes with a newborn, I remember feeling a deep sense of relief. Life, for all its unpredictability, was still giving us something beautiful.

Around the same time, another high note began to take shape — smaller, quieter, and far less visible. After months of hospitals, plaster, physiotherapy, and that slow, grinding fear of “what if this is it?”, I began taking the first tentative steps back toward running. Not proper running. Not the version I remembered from earlier years. Just a few metres. A few hundred metres on a good day. A cautious, slightly awkward movement that didn’t look impressive, but felt like a miracle to me because it meant the door hadn’t been sealed shut completely. I didn’t realise it then, but those two things — a new daughter in my arms and running returning under my feet — were quietly connected. One gave me joy. The other gave me stability. One made my world fuller. The other made my mind quieter.

Together, they made 2009 feel less like a recovery phase and more like a return to living.

By then, I had already heard the words that changed my relationship with my body forever. The doctors had made it clear that recovery wouldn't be quick or perfect. They wanted to observe me for longer, to see if the nerve would improve and the gait would normalise. They said all of this with calm professionalism, as if discussing weather forecasts. For them, it was clinical. For me, it was personal. Because every sentence carried the same unspoken meaning: you might not become who you were again. Yet I wasn't the kind of man who could sit still and accept that verdict in silence. Not because I was heroic, but because I was stubborn. Somewhere inside me, I had always believed that running was not just something I did when life was good. It was something I did so life stayed bearable even when it wasn't. When I lost running after the injury, I didn't just lose a routine. I lost the one place where my mind used to become quiet. I lost the simplest way to remind myself that I was still in control of something.

When I managed to jog those first few hundred metres during one of my walks, it didn't feel like training. It felt like evidence. Evidence that my body hadn't abandoned me completely. Evidence that the injury hadn't won in the final sense. Evidence that there was still a runner somewhere in there — even if he ran with a limp, even if he ran with fear, even if he ran without the clean, confident stride I once took for granted. Of course, life didn't pause for my emotional healing. Work didn't pause. Family didn't pause. Sleep was suddenly a luxury. Peace was temporary. And in that mix, running began to return, not as a grand comeback story, but as a small daily rebellion. Not with a finish line. Not with a trophy. Just with a decision that was oddly simple and oddly difficult at the same time: even if my body was no longer perfect, I would still run.

I didn't announce my return to running. I didn't even admit it properly to myself at first. It arrived in pieces — a few minutes here, a few hundred metres there — like a nervous animal stepping out after a long storm, unsure whether the world outside was safe again. I was relieved, yes. But there was also a feeling mixed into it that I didn't like admitting even to my own mind. I wasn't proud of how it looked. My running style was questionable. That's the polite version. The honest version is that my gait was still f'ed up. It wasn't graceful. It wasn't clean. It wasn't the kind of movement that makes you feel like a runner. It was the kind of movement that makes you feel like a man trying to remember how his own body works. I could tolerate pain. I could tolerate slow progress. What I couldn't tolerate was the idea of people seeing it — not because I wanted sympathy, but because I didn't want to be measured. I didn't want someone else's eyes turning my private effort into a public judgement.

So, I chose darkness. I started running well before sunrise, when the world was still half asleep and the roads belonged to silence, stray dogs, and a few people who looked like they had already made peace with life. I would step out even before the sky had decided what colour it wanted to be. There was no traffic, no noise, no audience. Just emptiness — and emptiness felt safe. At first, the distance was almost insulting. A few hundred metres, and I would stop. Sometimes because of discomfort. Sometimes because of fear — not fear of pain exactly, but fear of relapse. Fear that I would push too soon and hear “that sickening internal ‘snap’” again, the one that changes your life in one second. Fear that I would go back to the hospital bed, back to the cast, back to that helplessness where you stare at your own leg and it feels like it belongs to somebody else.

But the dangerous thing about small victories is that they don't stay small in your head. Those two hundred metres became my first proof. Then, without any dramatic decision, I began

building on it the way injured men build confidence — not like athletes chasing glory, but like someone testing whether a cracked floor will hold weight again. One lamp post more. One extra turn. One more loop before going back home. Slowly, the two hundred metres became one kilometre. One kilometre became two. Two became three. Then five. Not fast. Not pretty. But real.

And with distance came something else I hadn't expected. My gait began to improve. Not overnight. Not miraculously. But enough for me to notice. Enough for me to stop thinking about every step. Enough for me to feel, occasionally, like I wasn't limping through my own life anymore. I still had that sense of awkwardness at the beginning of every run — the body taking time to settle, the ankle feeling stiff, the leg needing persuasion — but once I warmed up, there were moments when it felt almost normal. "Almost normal" is not something you celebrate when you're healthy. When you're injured, "Almost normal" feels like a grace.

After five or six months, I reached a number that carried very personal weight. Ten kilometres. Not because ten kilometres is some legendary distance in the running world. It isn't. Plenty of people run ten kilometres and still complain that the lift was slow that morning. But for me, ten meant something else. Ten meant I had returned to a version of myself I still recognised. Ten meant I wasn't just moving anymore — I was running again. The joy I felt wasn't loud or dramatic. It was quiet relief, the kind that makes you exhale as if you've been holding your breath for a year. And the funniest part is this: my ambition didn't go beyond that. I didn't suddenly start dreaming of races. I didn't think of timing charts or trophies. I didn't say, "Now I will become some elite runner." No. My only ambition was simple: I should be able to run. That was it. To run ten kilometres and come back home feeling like myself, even if my

body wasn't perfect and even if the medical papers would never use the word "fit" for me again.

After that, it became routine — clockwork. The kind that doesn't require motivation, because motivation is unreliable and discipline is not. I would get up early, run, come back, and step straight into life. Family, responsibilities, duty, work — everything waiting, as it always does. The run became the one part of the day that felt private, the one part that belonged only to me. It wasn't training anymore. It was maintenance — not of fitness, but of who I was. And slowly, as confidence returned, I did something that surprised even me.

I started playing again. Football first — carefully, cautiously, as if the field still held the memory of what it had done to me. Hockey too. I wasn't reckless, but I wasn't hiding anymore. I had been afraid that the injury would permanently reduce my world, make it smaller, tighter, safer. But somewhere in the middle of those dark morning runs, I realised I didn't want safety. I wanted life.

And that's when life played one of its ridiculous jokes. After my injury, my free kicks developed a strange personality. When I kicked the ball, it didn't always travel straight. It would curve in a weird, unpredictable way, as if my damaged leg had decided to add "mystery spin" as compensation for everything it had taken away. The goalkeeper would look confused, the defence would hesitate, and for one brief moment I would feel like I had unlocked a hidden talent. *"Bend it like Beckham"* - except without the skill, without the hair, and with a nerve injury as the secret coach.

I wasn't back to being the same man I was before 05 August 2008. That man didn't exist anymore. But I was becoming something else — a man who had stopped waiting for a complete recovery and had started choosing movement anyway. A man

who didn't need perfection to feel whole. A man who had finally made a quiet agreement with his own body: I will run, even if I run imperfectly. I will play, even if I play carefully. I will live, even if the papers say "permanent disability." By then, life had stopped feeling like a medical case file and had started feeling like life again. Not the carefree kind of life where you move without thinking, but the kind where you are always faintly aware of your own body — as if it has become a slightly unpredictable colleague. Most days it cooperates. Some days it reminds you that it has its own mood. The injury didn't vanish like bad weather. It stayed, quietly, like humidity — invisible, but always present in the air.

I was functioning. I was working. I was running. I was playing again. I was coming home to a house that had its own chaos, its own warmth, its own beautiful madness. Two daughters do that. They don't just increase the number of people in a family; they change the temperature of the home. There is always some small thing happening — a sudden cry, a sudden laugh, an unexpected tantrum, a demand for attention, a new milestone that makes you smile even when you don't have the energy left to smile. The world doesn't pause for your injury, and that, strangely, is a blessing. Because you stop being the centre of your own sorrow. It was in that phase — when running had returned to being normal enough to stop feeling miraculous — that an unlikely thought entered my life. Not through wisdom. Not through inspiration. Through Orkut.

To think of Orkut now feels ridiculous. People today share their entire lives on Instagram stories before they've even lived those moments properly. Back then, Orkut was where you occasionally stumbled across people you hadn't thought about in years, and then stared at their updates like you were reading their horoscope. It was harmless, except sometimes it delivered news that hit you unexpectedly hard.

One day, I came to know that an old friend of mine had completed a full marathon. My first reaction was the obvious one: Wow! Because a marathon is always a wow. 42.195 km is not a casual idea. Even people who don't run know that. Even people who hate running respect it. It carries a certain myth around it — a belief that only the unusually strong, unusually gifted, unusually disciplined can do it. The marathon lives in the same mental category as “Everest,” “special forces training,” and “I will wake up at 5 AM every day from tomorrow.” Things people admire... from a safe distance.

But what shook me wasn't the distance. It was the man who had done it. This particular friend was always good at PT. Strong. Fit. The kind of man you never worried about during training. But running? Running was his Waterloo. It was never his favourite thing. If there was one thing you could associate with him, it was that he would happily do anything else as long as it wasn't running. And now he had run a marathon. I met him later and became that annoying person who asks too many questions. How did he start? Why did he start? Where did he train? Did he suffer? Did he regret it halfway through? Did he want to punch the organisers at the finish line? He laughed. He spoke about it casually, which somehow made it more impressive. He told me he had been in a place where there were many fit people around him, and slowly he got influenced. Motivated. Pulled into the culture. He started running gradually, the way most people begin things that later become addictions. Then he said the one thing that stayed with me. He said he didn't run fast. He ran at his own pace. His comfort pace. He didn't chase speed. He just kept running.

And that sentence did something dangerous inside my head. Because for years, I had imagined marathons as the playground of fast runners — men who glide, men who float, men who look like they were born with springs in their legs. I didn't see myself

there. Somewhere inside me, I had always believed that a marathon demanded greatness — and I was ordinary. But if a man could finish a marathon by running slowly, then the marathon wasn't about speed. It wasn't about talent. It was about willingness. It was about the ability to keep moving even when everything inside you is begging you to stop. And that, sounded like my entire personality.

I didn't say it out loud to him, but the thought arrived anyway: Buddy... if this guy can do it, why can't I try? It wasn't arrogance. It was curiosity mixed with quiet greed — the kind you feel when you see someone touch a boundary and suddenly want to know what it feels like on the other side. At that time, I didn't understand marathons technically. I didn't know about training blocks, pacing plans, gels, hydration, shoes, or recovery. I only knew the basic number: 42.195 kms. It sounded insane. But it also sounded tempting.

By then, I had proved something to myself. Not to the world. To myself. I had proved that I could come back from a place where the story was supposed to end. I had proved that even with a limp, even with an ugly gait, even with a body that wasn't perfect anymore, I could still keep going. And once you discover you can keep going, the mind begins to search for the next impossible thing. The thought didn't become a plan immediately. It just stayed there — like a small, stubborn idea sitting quietly in the corner of the mind, waiting for the right moment to become a decision.

And then, as if life had decided to provide the setting, my posting orders arrived. Mumbai. Mumbai is not just a city. Mumbai is a nervous pulse. It moves fast. It breathes fast. It makes you feel small and alive at the same time. And somewhere inside that city was something that now felt like it belonged to me, even though I hadn't earned it yet. The Mumbai Marathon. Back then, it was called the Standard Chartered Mumbai Marathon —

SCMM. Today, it has a different name, but the madness is the same. Thousands of people running through the streets of a city that never normally slows down for anyone.

When I landed in Mumbai in May 2011, I didn't make a dramatic declaration. I didn't tell people, "I'm going to run a marathon." That would have been premature and, frankly, slightly ridiculous. But inside my head, something had settled. Professionally, I would do what I always did. I would do my job. I would carry my responsibility. That was non-negotiable. But personally, quietly, in the same private corner of my mind where I had once decided to run again before sunrise, I made another decision. I would attempt a marathon. Not because I wanted glory. Not because I wanted a podium. Not because I thought I was special. But because after everything that had happened — hospitals, casts, permanent labels — there was one thing I was no longer willing to accept: that my life would become smaller.

And somewhere between the sound of a newborn crying in 2009 and the roar of Mumbai traffic in 2011, I realised I had been doing one thing consistently without fully acknowledging it. I had been training for hope. Not the loud, motivational kind. The quiet kind — the kind you build one kilometre at a time, one dark morning at a time, one ordinary day at a time. I didn't know what Mumbai would demand of me. I didn't know what a marathon would demand of me. I didn't know whether my leg would behave on the day it mattered. I didn't know whether I was about to embarrass myself in front of an entire city.

But I knew this much: the runner in me was no longer asking for permission. He was asking for distance. And for the first time in a long time, the answer inside me was simple. Let's see how far this stubbornness can go.

CHAPTER 15

The Validation

“It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.”
- Sir Edmund Hillary

Mumbai arrived at a moment when my professional journey was beginning to demand a different kind of seriousness from me. Until then, I had done what was expected of me, moved through postings, delivered where required, and carried on without too much self-interrogation. I had been competent, dependable, and largely invisible, as people often are when they do their job well. But this posting was different. It wasn't routine, and it certainly did not feel accidental. It felt deliberate, as if someone somewhere had finally decided to test whether the previous six or seven years had actually amounted to anything. No one sat me down to explain what was at stake. But the message was clear enough.

This was a posting that mattered. One where performance would be noticed, where initiative would be expected rather than guided, and where failure would not arrive with excuses attached. It carried the quiet implication that if you did well here, better things would follow. From the first few weeks, it was evident that this was not an environment that allowed for drifting. The pace was faster, the scrutiny sharper, and the margin for error thinner than anything I had experienced before. Decisions carried weight. Time was scarce. Expectations were high, and they were not always articulated. You were expected to know. To anticipate. To deliver without fuss. Workdays were long, and even when the day ended on paper, the mind did not follow suit.

There was always something unfinished, something pending, something that could have been done better. As I settled into this new rhythm – learning the role, learning the unspoken rules that governed both – I became increasingly aware of a pressure that did not announce itself loudly but refused to leave. It wasn't panic. It was expectation. The kind that sits quietly in the background and colours everything you do. The kind that reminds you, gently but persistently, that this is not the place to coast.

Alongside the work was the idea of running a marathon, triggered by a friend's stories. At that point in my life, he was the only person I knew who had run a full marathon. When I reached Mumbai, that idea refused to stay politely in the background. It did not demand immediate action. It did not interrupt my workdays or insist on attention. But it lingered. During long evenings. During early mornings. During moments when the work finally quietened down just enough for thoughts to become audible. It stayed, not as a plan, but as a possibility that refused to be dismissed. The race date was broadly known (third Sunday of Jan 2012), but no training schedule was drawn up, no countdown clock was ticking away. It was still just an idea. But it was a solid one. It had weight. And it sat alongside professional pressure in a way that surprised me. Without fully acknowledging it, I had begun to carry two parallel agendas. One was visible, measurable, and professionally consequential. It came with evaluations, expectations, and long-term implications. The other was private, unreasonable, and oddly stubborn. It came with no external validation, no immediate reward, and no clear explanation for why it mattered so much. Both demanded time and commitment. Neither seemed interested in waiting for the other.

This was also where fear began to enter the picture, quietly and without drama. At work, fear has context. There are systems

around it. Structures. Reviews. Sometimes even second chances. Failure, when it happens, is rarely absolute. It can be explained, softened, reframed. A marathon offers no such comfort. You either show up and finish, or you don't. There is no committee to convince, no narrative to adjust, no one else to blame. That simplicity frightened me more than the distance itself. I did not admit this fear to anyone. There was nothing to admit yet, after all. Yet the possibility of failure sat quietly in my head, colouring the idea before it had even taken shape. The thought that I might attempt something entirely of my own choosing — and fail at it publicly — was unsettling in a way that professional pressure never quite was.

Perhaps that is why running began to matter more during this period.

Initially, running was simply something I did. Ten kilometres when I could. Sometimes twelve, on days when work was kinder or fatigue less assertive. There was no structure to these runs. No strategy. No larger intelligence guiding them. I ran at whatever pace felt manageable, on whatever route was convenient, fitting them into days already crowded with responsibility.

In hindsight, this was naïve. At the time, it felt like effort. And effort, to me, had always felt like progress. Mumbai, however, is not a city that allows you to remain naïve for long. The humidity did not care about your intentions. The heat did not respect your enthusiasm. The roads did not adjust themselves to your schedule. Running here forced honesty very quickly. If you were tired, you felt it immediately. If you were careless, the city punished you without ceremony.

Those early runs were not particularly enjoyable. They were functional. Necessary. They were about learning where the body resisted and where the mind tried to negotiate. Some days felt

manageable. Others felt like chores. On certain mornings, I would step out knowing fully well that the run would not be good, but I did it anyway because skipping felt worse. Slowly, without any dramatic shift marking the change, running stopped being optional. It became the one space in the day where nothing was expected of me except honesty. No outcomes. No evaluations. No quiet judgement waiting at the end. Just movement, breath, and the uncomfortable awareness of where I stood physically and mentally. In a city that demanded constant performance, the run became the only place where performance did not matter.

And it was there, somewhere between fatigue and routine, between work pressure and quiet insistence, that the idea of the marathon began to feel less like a fantasy and more like something that demanded a decision. That decision did not arrive cleanly. There was no morning when I woke up and said, yes, this is it! I am going to run a marathon, and everything will now align accordingly. What arrived instead was a slow tightening. The idea that had once felt distant began to press closer, asking for clarity. Running was no longer just something I did to clear my head or steal time for myself. It was beginning to demand an explanation, both physically and mentally.

Fear did not disappear as I ran more. If anything, it sharpened. Every run carried a quiet question: What if this doesn't work? Not dramatically, not catastrophically — just persistently. What if, after all this effort, I still couldn't do it? That fear was different from professional fear. It was cleaner. More personal. There was no one else to hide behind, no institution to absorb the impact. If I failed, it would not be because of circumstances or constraints. It would simply be because I was not capable enough. That thought sat heavily, especially on days when work had already taken more than it had given. And yet, I kept running.

It is difficult to explain this to people who haven't trained for something long and solitary. From the outside, it looks disciplined, even admirable. From the inside, it often feels indulgent and unreasonable. You are tired from work, but you still need to run. You are mentally drained, but the body has not done its part yet. Over time, you stop trying to explain why this matters, because you are not entirely sure yourself. My family was around. Life at home continued normally. Conversations happened. Responsibilities were shared. But preparation for a marathon is a strangely isolating process. Not because you are physically alone all the time, but because no one else is carrying the same invisible weight. You cannot easily explain why a bad run ruins your mood for the rest of the day. You cannot articulate why a slightly longer run feels like a small victory that needs no applause. And you certainly cannot justify why, on certain mornings, you need to step out again even when the body is already protesting. So, you stop explaining. You lace up. You step out. You carry that part of yourself quietly.

As the weeks went by, the mileage increased slowly, almost imperceptibly. Ten kilometres became routine. Twelve stopped feeling special. But the confidence I had assumed would arrive with that progression did not. Instead, the fear evolved. It became more specific. *What if I get injured?* *What if work overwhelms me and training collapses?* *What if I reach the start line and realise I have misjudged everything?* These were not dramatic fears. They were practical ones. They surfaced quietly during long runs, during moments when the body was tired and the mind had room to wander. And the most uncomfortable thought of all lingered beneath them: What if I am doing all this and still fail? This is the part that rarely gets spoken about. Training does not remove fear. It exposes it. Every increase in distance brings with it a new opportunity for doubt. Every successful run raises the stakes slightly. Because now, failing would mean wasting not just hope, but effort.

I did not talk about this much. Not because I was deliberately hiding it, but because there was no obvious place to put it. At work, there was no space for it. At home, it felt unnecessary to burden others with an anxiety they could not resolve. And so, it stayed where it belonged — inside the run. Running became the place where fear and effort met without judgement. Some runs were good. Others were forgettable. A few were outright bad. But all of them carried information. About the body. About the mind. About what happened when discomfort lasted longer than expected. Slowly, I began to understand that this was not just physical preparation. It was rehearsal for uncertainty.

There was also a quiet loneliness to this phase that I did not recognise at the time. Not the loneliness of being abandoned or unsupported, but the loneliness of choosing something that cannot be shared in real time. Family could see me leave. They could see me return tired. They could listen politely. But they could not inhabit the miles with me. And that was as it should be. Some things have to be done alone. As the training progressed, ignorance became harder to justify. Running more without understanding more began to feel reckless. The body was adapting, but I knew enough by then to realise that adaptation without direction was dangerous. Forty-two kilometres was not a distance you approached casually forever. At some point, the absence of a plan stopped being charming and started being irresponsible. And it was somewhere in this uneasy space — between fear that had sharpened and confidence that refused to arrive fully — that I realised I needed help. Not motivation. Not encouragement. Something more uncomfortable. Structure.

That need for structure did not come with excitement. It came because I had registered for the run. Sometime in Jul 11, I saw the announcement for SCMM, scheduled for Jan 2012. Back then, there was no online portal for registration. I lingered for a while, deciding whether to register for the HM or FM, and

my foolish approach to geography made me choose FM. Foolish, some would say. I think of it as providence. Actually, it was about the start point for HM vs FM – travelling to Bandra-Mahim Causeway or to VT (now CST) station. I was staying in Colaba, and VT made sense to me. So, I registered for FM. It meant I needed a plan. Until then, ignorance had offered a strange kind of protection. As long as I didn't know what proper marathon preparation looked like, I could convince myself that what I was doing was enough. Running regularly felt like commitment. Increasing distance felt like progress. Fatigue felt like proof. But somewhere deep down, I knew this was not sustainable. Forty-two kilometres was not a distance that respected good intentions forever. At some point, the absence of knowledge stopped being innocence and started becoming risk. That realisation was unsettling. It meant that if I continued the way I was going, failure would not be bad luck. It would be predictable. And that was harder to live with than the idea of not knowing any better. The turning point arrived out of the blue.

One morning, while running in the residential colony, I fell into conversation with someone who had often seen me run. Somewhere in that conversation, almost as an aside, I mentioned that I was preparing for the Mumbai Marathon. "Which one?" he asked. "The full marathon." There was a pause – long enough to feel it. "And how many half marathons have you run?" "None." The expression on his face told me everything before he spoke. Disbelief, amusement, and concern, all arriving together. He laughed, openly and without malice. "Do you have any idea what you've done?" I remember smiling as I answered, because the truth was simpler than any defence I could offer. "Idea to nahi hai (I don't have any idea)," I said, "but ab kar liya hai to karna hai (but now that I have registered for it, I aim to complete it)." That made him laugh even harder. What followed mattered far more than the laughter. And once the amusement settled, he did something that, in hindsight, probably saved me

from myself. He offered help. Not encouragement. Not motivation. Structure. “Come and meet me,” he said. “Let’s see what you’re doing.”

That meeting was uncomfortable in ways I had not anticipated. For the first time, I was forced to see my preparation not as effort but as method. Or rather, the lack of it. He didn’t mock what I had been doing. He didn’t dismiss my runs. But he made it very clear that enthusiasm, no matter how sincere, was not a training plan. That was when I was introduced to ideas that seem obvious now but felt revelatory then. Base mileage. The importance of running easy, not hard, most of the time. The centrality of the long run. The necessity of rest days — actual rest days, not days when you run less and pretend it counts as recovery. The discipline of increasing mileage gradually. Three weeks of progression, followed by one week of stepping back. Allowing the body time to absorb stress rather than constantly adding more.

What struck me most was not the complexity but the restraint. Everything I had been doing until then was driven by a quiet urgency — the need to prove something quickly, before doubt caught up. What he was suggesting required patience. Trust. The willingness to believe that less, done correctly, would eventually lead to more. August 2011 was when preparation stopped being hopeful and became deliberate. The long runs changed first. They were no longer casual extensions of shorter efforts. They became appointments. Commitments. Distances that demanded respect before they were attempted. Running beyond what felt comfortable was no longer accidental; it was planned. And because it was planned, it revealed truths that casual running had never exposed.

One Sunday, I planned a long run of twenty-five or twenty-six kilometres. I managed twenty-three. Mumbai’s heat and humidity did the rest. I remember reaching home completely

spent, stepping into the shower, and collapsing. Not dramatically. Just folding. The body had nothing left to negotiate with. That day did not feel heroic. It felt educational. It taught me something fundamental I had been ignoring — hydration was not optional. Fatigue was not always a sign of effort well spent. Sometimes it was a warning. Training carried on through the monsoon. Rain or shine, I ran. Early mornings on Marine Drive became familiar. My Sunday would begin even as Saturday night was still dissolving for others. I watched the city wake up — excess giving way to routine — while I moved through it slowly, deliberately, one step after another. There was a strange comfort in that repetition. Once, during one of those early morning runs, I crossed paths with Anil Ambani. He was running with trainers, followed by support vehicles. It amused me briefly, mostly because the contrast was so stark. Different resources. Different worlds. Same road. And then the run continued. Everyone, it seemed, had their own reasons for being there. As the weeks passed, something subtle began to shift.

The fear did not disappear. If anything, it became more precise. But it no longer felt paralysing. It became something I carried alongside the training, rather than something that overshadowed it. Work was still demanding. The pressure did not ease. But the runs began to offer a strange counterbalance. Not escape, exactly — more like grounding. Running started to impose order on chaos. Days were structured around it. Fatigue was measured against it. Decisions were made with it in mind. Slowly, the marathon stopped being an abstract challenge and became a date I was moving towards, step by step. By December, I did not feel the kind of confidence people usually describe. I still had doubts. I still wondered if I was misjudging my ability. I still feared injury, fatigue, and the possibility of things falling apart at the wrong moment. But I felt ready in a quieter way. Ready enough to believe that standing on the start line would not be an act of pretence. Ready enough to trust that the work I had put in,

imperfect though it was, had meaning. Ready enough to accept that whatever happened on race day would not be accidental. I had not yet run the marathon. But by then, the person who would attempt it had already been shaped. And there was no turning back from that.

The seriousness of what I had signed up for did not hit me on race morning. It arrived earlier, during the bib collection. Until then, the marathon had still been an idea with a date attached to it. I had trained for it, structured my weeks around it, worried about it in abstract ways — but it had not yet acquired mass. The expo changed that. Walking into that space for the first time was like crossing an invisible line. There were people everywhere. Queues, counters, volunteers, signage. It wasn't chaotic, but it was busy in a purposeful way. Organised. Intentional. Serious. You could tell, almost immediately, who the first-timers were. They had a particular look — alert, slightly tense, eyes moving too quickly from one thing to another. Trying to take everything in, trying not to look lost. Then there were the others. The veterans. They moved differently. Casually. Almost indifferently. Bib collection was just another task on a list. They knew where to go, what to do, how long it would take. But beneath both groups, there was something common. Nobody was there by accident. Nobody was wandering in out of curiosity. Everyone meant business. That realisation stayed with me.

Collecting my bib felt strangely significant. A small rectangle of paper with a number on it, but it changed the nature of everything. Until that moment, I had been preparing for a marathon. Now I was officially part of one. Along with the bib came the timing chip — not embedded as it is now, but a separate piece that had to be looped into the shoelaces. I remember holding it in my hand and thinking how odd it was that something so small was about to record something that felt so large.

Back home, preparation became almost ceremonial. The bib was laid out. The singlet chosen. Shoes checked and rechecked. Everything was done with an attention that bordered on the absurd, considering how little control I would eventually have over the day itself. Somewhere in this process, a small but memorable mistake occurred. I had pinned the bib from the outside, the way most people do. My wife looked at it and said it didn't look neat. "Why don't you pin it from the inside?" she suggested. It sounded sensible. I agreed. Those four pins would spend the next few hours reminding me of that decision.

The night before the race I did not follow any textbook advice. There was a function at the club — only for women. My wife and daughters went. Dinner had been taken care of. I was at home, alone, with time on my hands and nerves I hadn't yet learned to manage properly. Out of boredom, or perhaps an attempt to calm myself, I had a couple of drinks. Maybe three. Not celebratory. Not reckless. Just unthinking. I ate, tried to sleep, and eventually did. I don't remember when sleep came. I only remember that it wasn't restful in the way you hope it will be before something important.

Race morning arrived with a strange mix of sensations. There was excitement, of course. But it was not clean excitement. It was tangled with nervous energy, uncertainty, and a low hum of fear that refused to be silenced. I got ready quietly, careful not to rush, careful not to forget anything. Shoes. Bib. Chip. Everything accounted for. Or so I thought. Getting to the start area itself felt like part of the ritual. I reached near CST — VT, as it was still called then — while the city was still waking up. There was an orderliness to the streets that felt unnatural for Mumbai. As I reached the holding area, the scale of the event began to reveal itself. There were runners everywhere. Not in the casual way you see people jogging on Marine Drive or in parks, but in numbers that demanded acknowledgment. Thousands of them.

All moving in roughly the same direction. All carrying their own private versions of hope and doubt. It was overwhelming and reassuring at the same time. Overwhelming because of the sheer scale. Reassuring because it made one thing clear — I was not the only foolish person attempting this.

Standing there, waiting, I became acutely aware of my own ordinariness. There were runners who looked fitter than me. Leaner. Faster. There were runners who looked older, heavier, slower. There were runners chatting confidently, and others standing silently, lost in their own thoughts. Some stretched obsessively. Some did nothing at all. And somewhere in that mass, I stood with no pacing strategy, no hydration plan worth the name, and only a rough idea of the route. And yet, strangely, I felt calm. Not confident. Calm. Perhaps it was the anonymity of the crowd. Perhaps it was the realisation that whatever happened, it would happen to all of us in our own ways. Or perhaps it was simply that there was nothing left to decide anymore. Training was over. Preparation had ended. The only thing left was execution. As the minutes ticked down to the start, the seriousness that had first surfaced at the expo settled into something heavier. This was no longer about ideas or intentions. There would be no more adjustments, no more second chances. In a few moments, the clock would start, and whatever I had brought to the start line would have to be enough. I remember thinking, not dramatically, not heroically, but very plainly: Let's see what happens. And then, slowly, inevitably, the movement began.

When the race finally started, it did so with unmistakable drama.

Announcements echoed across the start area, music played in the background, voices rose and fell, and a collective electricity impossible to recreate anywhere else filled the air. The city, which had been half-asleep when we arrived, now felt fully awake.

Volunteers shouted encouragement, runners bounced lightly on their toes, watches were checked and rechecked, and the air itself seemed charged with anticipation. It was cinematic in the truest sense of the word – not artificial, not staged, but created by the sheer number of people standing there, ready to attempt the same improbable thing. You could feel the energy physically. Thousands of runners pressed forward, held in place only by timing mats, each carrying their own private mix of confidence, doubt, hope, and fear. Some smiled nervously, some stood very still, eyes closed, as if trying to absorb the moment before it escaped. The seriousness that had been building quietly over months suddenly became visible. This was no longer preparation. This was performance.

When the movement finally began, it was not a surge but a release.

I crossed the start line aware that the clock had begun, but without any sense of urgency. Forty-two kilometres does not invite haste. It demands patience, whether you understand that or not. I started running with the crowd, letting myself be carried by the flow, adjusting my stride, settling into space, breathing in the noise and excitement. There was no pacing strategy guiding me, no numbers in my head dictating behaviour. There was only movement. And it felt... good. Better than good, actually. The body felt cooperative in a way that is always slightly surprising on race mornings. No stiffness. No heaviness. No resistance. The nerves that had accompanied me until a few minutes earlier seemed to dissolve once my legs found their rhythm. Breathing settled. The stride smoothed out. Whatever tension I had carried to the start line began to leak away, replaced by something dangerously reassuring. We moved along Marine Drive, that familiar arc curving gently alongside the sea. I had run this stretch countless times during training, but that morning it felt entirely different. The road was wide open, empty of traffic, surrendered

completely to runners. The city, usually impatient and unyielding, had stepped aside. There was space — to move, to breathe, to exist without negotiation.

I remember thinking, briefly, how strange it was that something I had done so many times before could feel so new simply because of context.

As the kilometres ticked by, the crowd began to thin, not dramatically but enough to allow individual rhythms to emerge. Some runners surged ahead, carried by early enthusiasm. Others settled into steady patterns. A few already looked uncomfortable, their optimism having asked too much, too soon. I noticed these things without judgement or analysis. They were simply part of the moving landscape. Turning towards Babulnath, I became aware of how relaxed I felt. Not euphoric yet, but comfortable in a way I had not anticipated. The fear that had accompanied my preparation seemed distant, almost irrelevant. This was not the punishing effort I had imagined. This was manageable. That thought should have worried me more than it did.

Pedder Road rose and fell gently, and I ran it without hesitation. Down to Cadbury Junction, then onward, Haji Ali steady on the left, familiar and reassuring. These were roads I knew well, roads I had trained on, but never like this. Never uninterrupted. Never shared with thousands of others moving in the same direction, for the same reason. Somewhere along this stretch, I realised I was enjoying myself. Not recklessly, not with abandon, but with a quiet appreciation for how the body was responding. There was no sense of effort accumulating, no warning signs, no need to constantly check the watch. I wasn't calculating splits or projecting outcomes. I was simply running, trusting that whatever came next could be dealt with when it arrived. In hindsight, that trust was naïve. But it was also honest.

Approaching Worli, the route unfolded in a way I had never experienced before. And then came the Sea Link. On any other day, access to it would have been unthinkable. No pedestrians. No runners. No exceptions. That morning, we were allowed on. Thousands of us, running high above the water, cables rising and falling around us, the city stretching out on either side. It felt surreal, as if the rules of Mumbai had been temporarily rewritten in our favour. I slowed slightly there, not because I needed to, but because I wanted to take it in. There were no smartphones with front cameras then, no instinctive reach for documentation. The moment did not ask to be recorded. It only asked to be noticed. And I noticed it fully — the height, the expanse, the strange quiet that comes from being suspended between effort and awe. Then the Sea Link ended, and the road returned. So did the rhythm.

I crossed the Bandra-Mahim Causeway, yet I barely noticed it. The body still felt strong. The legs still responded willingly. If anything, I felt lighter than I had expected to at this point. This was the most dangerous part of the day. The stretch around Sampat Vinayak came and went, and then the turn back towards Worli. Somewhere during this return, the realisation formed quietly that I was deep into unfamiliar territory. Not just in terms of distance, but in terms of sustained ease. I had been running for hours now, and yet the effort had not escalated as I had been warned it would. There was no wall. At least, not yet.

That absence bred a subtle arrogance. Not loud, not boastful, but internal. The quiet belief that perhaps the difficulty of this thing had been exaggerated. That perhaps all the stories were overstated. That maybe, just maybe, this was simply about showing up and keeping moving. By the time I reached Cadbury Junction again, now well into the thirties in terms of kilometres, I felt comfortable. Pedder Road loomed ahead for the second time, that familiar incline waiting to test whatever assumptions I

had formed. I ran it without stopping. No bargaining. No calculation. Just steady movement. The city was up properly now, spectators lining parts of the route, volunteers alert and encouraging. Their voices blended into a general hum of support that I absorbed without focusing on any one sound.

I reached Babulnath Temple again, aware that I was approaching something significant, though I could not have articulated why it felt that way. The water point was visible ahead. I slowed, stopped briefly, drank water, and used the sponge. The routine was mechanical, unthinking. I glanced at my watch. Around thirty-seven kilometres. Three hours and fifteen minutes. The number registered without celebration or alarm. I did not interpret it. I simply noted it. What mattered more was the thought that followed, simple and unambiguous: Bas! Last five now. I remember straightening slightly, as if preparing to close something out. As if the hardest part was behind me. As if all that remained was execution. And that was precisely when the body reminded me who was in charge.

It happened suddenly. There was no warning tremor, no polite signal from the body asking for attention. One moment I was upright, moving forward, still carrying the quiet confidence of someone who believes the worst is behind him. And in the next, pain announced itself without negotiation. A sharp, searing cramp shot through my right leg. Not discomfort. Not fatigue. Pain — immediate, total, and paralyzing. I stopped instinctively, more out of shock than choice. The leg refused to cooperate. When I tried to take another step, it collapsed inward, the muscle locked so tightly that even standing became an effort. Walking was impossible. Running was unthinkable. For a few seconds, I simply stood there, stunned.

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. Not now. Not after everything had gone so smoothly. Thirty-seven kilometres were already behind me. Three hours and fifteen minutes of

steady movement, of quiet belief, of thinking that perhaps I had figured this out. And now this — five kilometres from the end, when the finish line felt close enough to imagine. The body had other ideas. I tried to shake it out. I stretched awkwardly, gingerly, afraid of making it worse. Every attempt sent a fresh wave of pain through the muscle. The leg felt alien, as if it belonged to someone else entirely. Around me, runners continued to pass — some strong, some struggling, all moving forward. I had become stationary, abruptly and humiliatingly so.

That was the first moment when the possibility of not finishing entered my head. Not dramatically. Not as a declaration. Just a quiet, horrifying thought: What if this is it? Thirty-seven kilometres done. Five left. Close enough to taste, far enough to lose everything. I remember looking down at the road, not knowing what to do next. The noise of the race faded slightly, replaced by a ringing awareness of pain and helplessness. This was not exhaustion that could be pushed through with willpower. This was the body refusing to comply. And then, out of nowhere, a voice cut through. “Kya ho gaya, runner (What happened, runner)?” A man stepped toward me from the side of the road — a stranger, one of the many spectators lining the route. He didn’t hesitate. Didn’t ask permission. He took one look at my posture and knew. “Cramp aa gaya (I have cramps),” I said, the words coming out flat, stripped of emotion. Without ceremony, he helped me stretch. Held my leg steady. Pressed, released, adjusted. It hurt — badly — but it was a purposeful pain, the kind that carries hope with it. I don’t remember his face clearly. I remember his presence. Calm. Practical. Unfazed. “Ho jayega (You will be able to do it),” he said. “Dheere Dheere (Slowly).”

That mattered more than I realised at the time. When I tried to move again, the pain was still there, but it had loosened its grip just enough to allow motion. Not running. Not even walking

properly. More like limping, half-dragging the leg forward, negotiating each step. I started moving again. Slowly. Awkwardly. Painfully. There was no grace in what followed. No rhythm. No illusion of strength. Every step had to be earned individually. I walked when I had to. Jogged when the leg allowed it. Stopped when the muscle threatened to seize again. The road that had earlier felt generous and open now felt endless. But one thing was clear. I was not stopping. The thought of a DNF (Did Not Finish) — of not finishing — was suddenly unbearable. Not because of pride, not because of time, but because of everything that had led to this point. The months of preparation. The early mornings. The loneliness. The doubt. The quiet decision to try something unreasonable. To stop now would be to leave all of that unresolved. “Ab nahi (Not Now),” I remember thinking. “Ab nahi (Not Now).”

Five kilometres is nothing when you are fresh. Five kilometres is everything when you are broken. Time stretched. Distance distorted. The body became a problem to be managed rather than a partner to be trusted. I stopped caring about pace entirely. The clock no longer mattered. All that mattered was forward motion, however inelegant it looked. Somewhere in that slow, painful progression, emotion began to surface. Not frustration. Not anger. Something closer to grief. The loss of the finish I had imagined. The acceptance that this would not be triumphant or neat. That it would not be a strong finish or a proud sprint down the final stretch. That it would be, instead, a compromise. A negotiation. A survival. And yet, even in that moment, there was a strange clarity. This, I realised, was also part of the marathon. Not the running, but the reckoning. As the finish area finally came into view, the noise returned in waves. Cheers. Music. Announcements. The energy I had forgotten existed. I straightened as much as I could, more out of instinct than intention. The leg protested, but it held. I crossed the finish line without drama. No raised arms. No sprint. Just relief. The

clock showed 4 hours and 15 minutes. Once the finish line was behind me, the world slowed abruptly. Not gradually, not politely — abruptly. The noise softened. The urgency dissolved. The body, which had been negotiating fiercely just moments ago, seemed to switch off in stages, each muscle releasing its claim on attention one by one. The cramp had not vanished, but it had retreated enough to allow me to exist without wincing at every movement.

Almost immediately, a volunteer stepped forward and placed a medal around my neck. In that moment — unexpectedly, overwhelmingly — something inside me broke open. I took the medal off my neck almost immediately. It didn't feel right hanging there, swinging loosely as I shuffled forward. Instead, I held it in my hand. Not casually. Not absent-mindedly. I closed my fingers around it and kept it there, as if I needed to feel its weight constantly to convince myself that this had actually happened. It wasn't a trophy. It wasn't decoration. It was proof. Tangible, undeniable proof that the idea I had once carried quietly had survived contact with reality.

I don't remember smiling. I don't remember cheering. What I remember is standing there, slightly bent, breathing deeply, feeling a strange calm settle in. The kind of calm that comes only after prolonged tension finally releases its grip. Around me, runners were celebrating, hugging, collapsing, laughing, crying. Volunteers moved efficiently, offering water, food, directions. It was all happening, but at a slight distance. As if I were watching it through a thin pane of glass. I walked slowly to one side and lay on the ground. There was no drama in it. Just a quiet decision to stop holding myself upright. I stretched gently, carefully, aware that the body was still fragile, still capable of surprise. The cramp lingered like a warning, not gone, but subdued. I took my time. There was no hurry anymore. For the first time in hours, nothing was waiting for me. Eventually, I

called a taxi and went home, moving carefully, protecting the leg, protecting the moment.

The medal stayed in my hand. Not because I was afraid it would be taken away, but because I wasn't ready to put it anywhere else. It didn't belong on a wall. It didn't belong in a bag. It belonged with me, right there, while the effort was still warm, while the memory was still settling into muscle and bone. I carried it with me. To the shower. To the bed. I kept it close, not hung up, not displayed, just present. I must have looked ridiculous, a grown man lying there, exhausted, sore, holding a piece of metal as if it might disappear. But in that moment, it felt necessary. Afterwards, I lay down, exhausted in a way that felt earned rather than depleted. The medal rested nearby. Not displayed. Not celebrated. Just present. Within reach. I had finished my first marathon. I had finished my first marathon. Not elegantly. Not impressively. But honestly. And for that moment, that was enough. And that, I would later realise, mattered far more.

The meaning of that medal did not arrive all at once. It did not come rushing in with the exhaustion, or with the relief of sitting down, or even with the simple fact of having finished. At first, it was just there — present, physical, undeniable. Something solid to hold on to while the body slowly settled and the mind tried to catch up. Pain still existed. Fatigue still occupied most of the available space. Understanding, whatever form it would take, needed time. What arrived first was not pride, but reassurance. A quiet reassurance that something I had imagined, something I had worked towards without certainty, had survived contact with reality. The medal itself was ordinary enough. Over time, I would collect many more — some heavier, some shinier, some attached to events that carried more prestige. But this one was different. Its weight had nothing to do with metal. It was proof.

Not proof of speed or talent or exceptional ability. Proof of effort, sustained over time, without guarantees. I had registered for a full marathon without fully understanding what it demanded. I had trained imperfectly, learned as I went along, and made mistakes that experience would later teach me to avoid. I had run well when conditions were kind and negotiated them painfully when they were not. And despite all of that, I had finished. That realisation settled slowly, but it settled firmly. Somewhere in that quiet aftermath, a belief took shape — not as a declaration, not as a lesson, but as something instinctive and steady. Effort, honestly given, guarantees meaning. Not outcomes. Not applause. Not success in the way the world usually measures it. Meaning. The kind that stays with you long after the moment has passed, available on days when nothing else feels reliable.

I had felt something similar once before, years earlier, when a diving badge was pinned to my chest. The same sense of validation, stripped of ceremony. Not celebration, not ego — recognition. The knowledge that I had committed to a process, respected it, endured it, and been changed by it. That marathon medal carried the same quiet authority. It wasn't telling me that I was special. It was telling me that I had stayed.

Life around me continued, as it always does. Family was there. Work waited. The day moved forward without pausing for my private milestone. And that felt right. Some experiences are not meant to be explained in full. They resist translation. They are meant to be carried, not displayed. Over the days that followed, the soreness faded. The fatigue loosened its grip. The cramp became something I could talk about without wincing. But the belief remained, steady and unchanged. I had not discovered running that day. I had discovered something about myself. That I could commit to something long and uncertain without needing clarity at the start. That doubt could coexist with effort without

cancelling it out. That finishing did not need to be graceful to be legitimate. That persistence, even when messy, carried its own dignity. And once you understand that, something shifts. You stop running to prove something. You start running to stay grounded. That day, without knowing it, I did not just finish a marathon. I gave running permission to remain in my life — not as an achievement to be chased, but as a companion that would quietly walk alongside everything that came next.

CHAPTER 16

The Long Middle

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” - Aristotle

The morning after my first marathon did not feel special. There was soreness, of course — the predictable stiffness that announces itself the moment you try to get out of bed and reminds you that the body remembers far more faithfully than the mind ever will. There was fatigue, too, the deep kind that sleep doesn’t quite erase. But beyond that, life behaved exactly as it always had. The city remained unchanged. Work waited. Responsibilities showed no inclination to pause or soften in recognition of what had happened the previous day. That normalcy was oddly comforting.

For a brief moment, somewhere between finishing the marathon and waking up the next morning, I had wondered whether something fundamental might shift. Whether finishing a marathon would alter how I saw myself, or how the world responded to me. It didn’t. The medal lay where I had placed it, quietly present but no longer demanding attention. There was no urge to pick it up repeatedly, no need to touch it for reassurance. Whatever work it had needed to do, it had already done. The real test came later that day.

I went back to work — not symbolically, but physically. There was an event scheduled, some inauguration or formal gathering, and a fair number of people were expected to be there. When I got out of the vehicle, I was limping. Not dramatically, but enough to be noticed. The body had not forgiven me yet, and it

made sure I didn't forget that fact. A few friends were present — people who knew I had planned to attempt the marathon. They noticed immediately. There were handshakes, back-slapping, and smiles that carried genuine warmth — a couple of quick congratulations. For a few minutes, my private effort became visible. It felt good. I won't pretend otherwise. And then it passed. The event took over. People drifted into their roles, conversations shifted, priorities reasserted themselves. I made my way back to the ship. Colleagues were around, familiar faces absorbed in familiar routines. No one asked me anything. No one commented on the limp. No one brought up the marathon.

For a fleeting moment, I felt a small sting of disappointment. Not because I needed applause, but because some part of me had expected acknowledgement. A question, perhaps. A nod. Something. But nothing came. Whether it was indifference or deference, I couldn't tell. And then, almost immediately, that feeling gave way to something else. Clarity. This had always been my journey. I hadn't run the marathon for the ship, or the service, or the people around me. I hadn't done it for congratulations or recognition. The validation I had been seeking — whether I admitted it openly or not — had already been delivered, quietly, the previous morning. Expecting the world to mirror that back to me now felt unnecessary, even misplaced. Life moved on, exactly as it should have.

The weeks that followed were busy. Schedules filled up quickly. Preparations for upcoming activities gathered pace. The operational rhythm returned with a familiarity that left little room for reflection. The marathon receded rapidly into the background, not because it lacked significance, but because significance does not demand constant attention. What lingered, though, was an impulse to put the experience somewhere. Not externally, not for approval, but to make sense of it myself. I decided to write about it. I sat down and tried to capture what the

preparation had felt like, what the run had been, and what finishing had done to me. It wasn't polished. It wasn't crafted for effect. It was honest, written more to understand than to impress. I tried to get it published. For reasons I don't fully remember now — timing, priorities, perhaps simple chance — it never was. The article went nowhere. There was no audience, no feedback, no follow-up. And with the benefit of hindsight, that feels entirely appropriate. Not every experience needs a platform. Some are complete in themselves, and asking them to perform for others only diminishes them.

Running, meanwhile, slipped back into its place almost without effort.

Not as a goal to be chased, and not as a memory to be replayed, but as something steady and familiar. There was no urgency to train again, no immediate hunger for another race. The body needed time, and the mind was content to allow it that courtesy. Running did not disappear, but it also did not demand centre stage. That, I would later realise, was an important shift. For the first time, running existed without asking anything of me. It wasn't trying to prove a point or justify its presence. It simply stayed, quietly occupying the margins of my days, ready to step forward when called upon, equally willing to wait when it wasn't. At the time, I didn't give this much thought. It felt natural, even mundane. Only much later did I understand what was happening. The marathon had not turned me into a runner who needed constant validation. It had allowed running to become steadier, less dramatic, more durable. The noise had faded. What remained was not ambition or restlessness, but a calm curiosity about what running would look like when it was no longer trying to prove anything at all.

If the first marathon taught me that running could endure without demanding applause, the months that followed taught me something harder: running would survive only if it learned to

negotiate. Life did not rearrange itself to accommodate my newfound identity as a runner. If anything, it pushed back. Work schedules tightened, expectations grew sharper, and the rhythm of professional life asserted itself with renewed confidence. Running, which had briefly enjoyed the indulgence of being a central project, now had to find its place again — not at the centre, but at the edges.

This was the phase where I learned that enthusiasm alone is a fragile thing. There were days when running felt effortless, almost automatic. Early mornings when the body cooperated, and the mind felt clear. But there were many more days when running required justification — not always to others, but to myself — long hours at work, fatigue that felt legitimate, responsibilities that could not be postponed. The temptation to skip a run was rarely dramatic. It arrived quietly, dressed as reason. I began to understand that consistency was not about discipline in the heroic sense. It was about flexibility. About learning to bend without breaking. Some weeks, I ran often. Some weeks, I barely ran at all. What mattered was not the perfection of the routine, but the refusal to let running disappear entirely.

Work, during this period, played an unpredictable role. I had bosses who instinctively understood that running was not a distraction from my profession but a support to it. They noticed that I functioned better when I ran — calmer, more focused, less brittle under pressure. With them, the conversation was easy. A request for a weekend off to run an event was met with practical questions rather than suspicion. They trusted that the work would get done, and it did. And then there were others. Bosses who saw running as an indulgence. As time wasted. As evidence that you were not serious enough about your career. With them, running had to become invisible. Early mornings grew earlier. Explanations became shorter. I stopped seeking approval and

focused instead on permission — and sometimes not even that. Looking back now, I don't judge either group harshly. They were responding to what they valued and understood. What mattered more was how I responded. In those years, I learned that support is helpful, but dependence is dangerous. If running needed universal approval to survive, it was already lost.

So, I learned to run around life, not through it. I ran when days allowed it, and I rested when they didn't. I stopped framing interruptions as failures. Courses, postings, deployments, responsibilities — these were not excuses; they were realities. Running had to coexist with them, not compete against them. There was a quiet maturity in this, though I didn't recognise it as such at the time. I no longer needed running to feel dramatic. I didn't need it to deliver breakthroughs or epiphanies. Some runs were forgettable. Some were awkward. Some felt unnecessary until halfway through, when something shifted and the day made a little more sense. That was enough.

What also changed during this phase was how I spoke about running.

Earlier, it had been easy to explain. I was training for a marathon. There was a date. A distance. A reason that people could understand, even if they didn't share it. Now, without a clear event looming every time, the explanations became harder to come by. "Just running" did not sound particularly compelling, especially to people who did not run themselves. So, I stopped explaining. Running became something I did, not something I defended. If people were curious, I answered. If they weren't, I didn't volunteer information. This quiet withdrawal from justification was freeing. It allowed running to exist without external validation.

There were stretches during this period when running dipped alarmingly low. Busy weeks turned into busy months.

Travel disrupted routines. I was not participating in any events. Fatigue accumulated. On a few occasions, I wondered whether running would fade out completely, absorbed by the weight of professional life. But each time, something pulled me back — not ambition, not guilt, but familiarity. Running had become a language my body understood, even when it had gone unused for a while. Returning to it felt less like restarting and more like resuming a conversation. With hindsight, I can see that this was an essential phase. Had running remained tied only to events and achievements, it would have collapsed under the pressure of real life. It was during these years — when running had to squeeze itself into early mornings, short windows, and imperfect weeks — that it proved its durability. It learned to survive without indulgence. By the end of this phase, running was no longer something I did in addition to my life. It had become something that adapted to it. Sometimes quietly, sometimes stubbornly, but always with a kind of persistence that mirrored my own. At the time, it didn't feel particularly noteworthy. In hindsight, it was everything.

Once running had learned how to survive in life, something unexpected happened. It began to grow again. There was no grand plan behind it. No declaration that I was now aiming higher or longer. Distance did not return as ambition; it returned as curiosity. Having come back from interruptions, restarts, and long spells of inconsistency, I no longer felt the need to prove that I belonged. Running was already part of me. The question shifted quietly from *"Can I still do this to what happens if I stay with it a little longer"*. The marathon I ran in September 2013 after restarting was a turning point in that regard. By most conventional measures, it was an unremarkable race. The timing was poor. Nearly five hours to finish, compared to the four-fifteen I had managed in Mumbai. If I had been chasing performance, it would have been a disappointment. But I wasn't. What mattered far more was that I finished. That after months

of academic pressure, weight gain, and physical neglect, the body still remembered how to endure.

That finish gave me confidence — not the loud, chest-thumping kind, but the quiet reassurance that interruptions did not erase capability. From there, running gathered momentum almost without my noticing. I began participating in events regularly. Sometimes one a month, sometimes fewer when work intervened, but often enough that running became a rhythm rather than an exception. The routine was familiar and faintly absurd: work through the week, travel on a Friday, collect the bib on Saturday, run on Sunday, and be back at work by Monday morning as if none of it had happened. It was hectic, occasionally exhausting, and deeply satisfying.

Looking back now, I can say that this was the most carefree phase of my running life. There was no obsession with outcomes. No fixation on pace. No elaborate training plans that demanded loyalty. I ran because I wanted to. I ran because it gave structure to that desire. Running felt light, even when the distances were not.

Somewhere during this phase, the distance extended again. I signed up for a 50-kilometre run, not with a sense of drama, but with curiosity. It felt like the next natural question to ask of myself. The most basic of ultras, perhaps, but an ultra all the same. I trained for it with the same steady approach that had carried me through marathons — patience over aggression, completion over performance. When I finished that 50K, there was no moment of revelation. No sense of having crossed into a new category of runner. No urge to announce that I had now “joined the ultra-club.” It simply felt like another long day spent moving forward, one step at a time. Distance, by then, had stopped being intimidating. It had become conversational.

I learned something important during that phase. Endurance suited me more than speed ever had. I was not built for explosive performance or fast finishes. I did not possess the natural economy that made shorter races elegant. But I could stay. I could keep going. I could tolerate discomfort without panicking over long distances, which mattered far more than raw speed. This realisation was liberating. It allowed me to stop pretending to be a runner I was not. I stopped chasing personal bests that didn't excite me and started paying attention to what felt sustainable. Running became less about how fast I could go and more about how honestly, I could show up.

Most of my runs during this period were on the road. Occasionally, I tried trail runs, intrigued by their unpredictability and solitude, but the road remained home. Familiar, unforgiving, and oddly comforting. Road running did not romanticise effort. It asked you to deal with monotony, with repetition, with your own thoughts. That suited me.

During these years, I ran in multiple cities across the country. Different climates, different routes, different rhythms — but the act remained the same. Running became a way for me to orient myself in unfamiliar places — a way of claiming temporary belonging. No matter where I was posted, I could step out, put one foot in front of the other, and feel anchored. At the time, I did not think of any of this as progression. There was no sense that I was climbing a ladder or ticking boxes. Marathons, ultras, regular events — they happened alongside life, not in competition with it. If work allowed, I ran. If it didn't, I waited. There was no resentment in that waiting, only patience. With hindsight, I can see how rare that balance was. Running had moved beyond being something I needed to prove. It had become something I trusted. Distance no longer felt like a challenge to overcome. It felt like a space I could inhabit, at my own pace, for as long as life allowed. And quietly, without ceremony, endurance had claimed me.

It was somewhere during that phase — when running had become routine rather than aspiration — that my relationship with it shifted again.

Until then, my engagement with running had been largely personal. I trained, I travelled, I ran events, and I returned to life as it waited for me. Even when distances grew longer, the focus remained inward. Running was something I did for myself, within the limits that work and circumstance allowed. That balance worked well, and I had no reason to question it.

The thought that changed things arrived quietly. The station I was posted at had no marathon event at all. Not one organised by civilians, not one by the services. If you wanted to run an organised race, you had to travel — sometimes far, sometimes expensively, always with time that not everyone could spare. I was inclined, and occasionally, I had the opportunity to do that. Many others did not. That realisation stayed with me. I began to notice how often enthusiasm ran into practical barriers. People who were curious about running but hesitant to commit because there was nothing local. People who would have participated if the opportunity existed close to home. It became clear that the absence of interest was not the problem. Absence of access was. So, I did something that, at the time, felt slightly foolish.

I proposed organising a marathon. I took the idea to a very senior admiral in the hierarchy. I framed it carefully. As a positive representation of the Navy. As an event that would engage the city. As something that aligned with fitness and discipline. He listened patiently, asked questions, and then expressed doubt — not unreasonably. Organising an event of that scale was not trivial, and I was not a professional event manager. After a fair amount of persistence, he finally said, “You can try.” That single sentence opened the door to one of the most demanding experiences of my life. What followed was intense, consuming, and at times overwhelming. At the start, it was almost entirely a

single-handed effort. Permissions, route planning, coordination with authorities, logistics, volunteers, safety — everything arrived at once, with no instruction manual. I learned by doing, often by making mistakes. Slowly, thankfully, help began to arrive. One colleague stepped in and shared the load. Others contributed in smaller but crucial ways. I also reached out beyond the system. I connected with people who had experience organising running events. One of them invited me to participate in an event he was conducting at Corbett National Park. The invitation was partly an olive branch, partly a test. I went, ran the event, observed closely, and asked questions. Over conversations and shared fatigue, we bonded. Eventually, he agreed to help. Plans took shape. Routes were finalised. Permissions fell into place. The event began to feel real.

Then, just as we were nearing the finish line of preparation, Cyclone Hudhud hit Visakhapatnam. The city was battered. Infrastructure damaged. Lives disrupted. Priorities shifted overnight. I was called in by the same admiral who had earlier permitted me, and he said, reasonably, that this was not the right time. The event would have to be postponed. It made sense. And yet, it felt devastating. Before any decision could be finalised, the senior-most admiral intervened. His view was different. He believed that this was precisely the time to go ahead. A time to showcase resilience. To bring people together. To remind the city — and ourselves — that recovery was not just about rebuilding structures, but about restoring spirit. With strong support from the city administration and multiple agencies, we went ahead. The event happened. It was not perfect. No first event ever is. But it was safe, well-received, and meaningful. Runners turned up. The city responded. The Navy was represented with quiet professionalism. What had once seemed like an improbable idea became a shared experience. For me, it remains one of the most important achievements of my running journey.

Not because I ran. In fact, I didn't. But because I helped create space for others to do so. I didn't think of it then as "giving back." That language came later, after the dust had settled. At the time, it felt more like responsibility. Once running had given me structure, stability, and meaning, it felt natural to protect and extend that space for others. The most satisfying part came later. The event did not remain an isolated effort. It was replicated elsewhere. The idea travelled. What had started as a local initiative found resonance elsewhere in the Navy. That quiet continuation mattered more to me than any applause the event itself received. Looking back now, I can see that this was a turning point. Running was no longer just something I participated in. It was something I felt accountable for, not in a grand, institutional sense, but in a personal one. I had crossed a line — from consumer to custodian, from beneficiary to enabler.

At the time, I didn't stop to reflect on any of this. There was work to return to. Life to resume. Running to negotiate for space once again. But something had shifted. Running had stopped being only about what it gave me. It had begun to matter in ways that extended beyond my own miles.

That change would stay with me long after the banners were taken down and the routes reopened to traffic.

After the high of organising the event, life returned to doing what it does best — demanding attention elsewhere. I moved to another ship posting soon after. This one came with its own set of challenges. The ship was in the middle of an extended maintenance and repair period, which in naval terms usually translates into long hours, constant problem-solving, and a workday that refuses to respect neat boundaries. Days blurred into nights. Priorities shifted rapidly. Fatigue became a familiar companion. Running, once again, had to negotiate its existence. This time, though, the conversation was different. I had reached a point where running was no longer something I was trying to

protect out of fear of losing it. It had already proven that it could survive interruptions. What I was now trying to protect was myself — from burnout, from stiffness, from the slow erosion that comes from living entirely inside work.

I did what I did best. I ran when I could. Some days that meant early mornings, stepping out before the world had fully woken up. On other days, it meant short, unsatisfying runs squeezed in between obligations. There were weeks when the mileage dropped sharply and months when events were few. None of that bothered me as much as it once might have. I had stopped measuring commitment by volume alone. My boss noticed. Not immediately, but eventually. He saw that despite the pressure of work; I still made time to run. I returned from those runs calmer, steadier, and more capable of dealing with the demands of the day. Over time, his scepticism gave way to acceptance, and then to quiet support. When I asked for permission to step away for one or two events, he allowed it. That permission mattered, not because it was generous, but because it acknowledged something important — that running was not competing with my profession. It was sustaining me within it.

Around this phase, I made another important adjustment. I added cycling to my routine. Not because it was fashionable, and not because I was chasing performance gains. It was practical. Running had taught me many things, but it had also made me aware of its limitations: the body, especially one carrying the demands of work and age, needed variety. Cycling allowed me to stay active without constantly loading the same muscles and joints. It gave me endurance without impact, effort without punishment. More importantly, it extended my relationship with movement. I wasn't trying to be faster or stronger. I was trying to stay in the game. That mindset began to shape everything. Training became less rigid, more adaptive. I listened to the body more closely. Some days it wanted to run. Other days, it wanted

to ride. Occasionally, it wanted rest, and I learned to respect that, too. The obsession with numbers — pace, distance, frequency — softened. What replaced it was a quieter awareness of sustainability.

The next posting, however, was a reminder that not everyone saw it that way. Here, running was viewed with suspicion. As indulgence. As wasted time. As evidence that one's priorities were misplaced. The message, though rarely stated outright, was clear enough. If you were serious about your work, you wouldn't be spending time running. It was a dampener.

By then, though, I had learned not to expect universal approval. Running had outgrown the need for validation. Along with a small group of like-minded colleagues — runners and cyclists — we found ways to keep moving. Sometimes discreetly. Sometimes defiantly. Always with a sense of shared understanding.

It was around this time, in 2016, that I finally ran my first half-marathon. The irony of it wasn't lost on me. By then, I had already completed marathons and even a 50 K race. Yet this relatively modest distance had somehow been skipped. When we found a half-marathon being conducted nearby, it felt like an opportunity rather than an ambition. We went, we ran, and I finished my first half-marathon almost as an afterthought. That, in many ways, summed up my running journey. It had never followed a conventional sequence. I hadn't graduated neatly from shorter distances to longer ones. I had responded to what life allowed at different points. The distances mattered less than the act of showing up.

By then, my running had become portable. I ran in different cities across the country. A new posting no longer meant disruption; it meant new routes: different weather, different terrain, different rhythms. Running became a way of orienting

myself in unfamiliar places, a way of grounding myself when everything else felt transient. With hindsight, I can see that this phase was about adaptation more than achievement. There were no headline moments. No dramatic finishes. But there was continuity. Running bent around work, around postings, around pressure, without snapping. It adjusted its demands and expectations, and in doing so, it taught me something essential. Longevity matters more than intensity. At the time, I didn't articulate it that way. I was doing what felt necessary. Only later did I realise that this was the phase where running stopped asking how much I could give, and started asking how long I wanted to stay. And I wanted to stay for a while.

There are phases when running slows down, and then there are moments when it is taken away. COVID was not an interruption. It was a full stop. When the first lockdown was announced, it felt unreal. The language itself sounded temporary — a pause, a measure, a precaution. Surely this would last a few days, perhaps a couple of weeks. Running, like everything else, could wait. That was the assumption most of us made, because we had never known a world that could shut down so completely. Then the days stretched. Movement was restricted. Roads emptied. Work reorganised itself awkwardly around screens and uncertainty. And running — which had always found a way to adapt — suddenly had nowhere to go. There were no routes, no permissions, no grey areas to negotiate. The rules were blunt and absolute. Stay indoors.

At first, I tried to hold on. Once or twice, I stepped out, cautiously, hoping that a quiet run in an empty street might pass unnoticed. It didn't. I was stopped and sent back. The message was unambiguous — this was not the time. Running, for the first time in years, was not a choice I could make. That loss was more unsettling than I expected. It wasn't just about fitness. It was about control. Running had always been the one constant I could rely

on — something I could do regardless of posting, workload, or circumstance. Suddenly, even that was gone. The body was willing, the mind was restless, but the world had closed its doors. Frustration set in quickly. Days blurred into each other. Without the release that running provided, stress accumulated differently. Restlessness had nowhere to drain. There was irritation, impatience, a sense of being trapped in ways that had nothing to do with physical space. Even when home was comfortable, the lack of movement felt suffocating.

There was also fear. Not the loud, immediate kind, but a persistent unease. Fear of the unknown. Fear of how long this would last. Fear of what would remain on the other side of it — professionally, personally, physically. Running had always helped me process uncertainty. Now, uncertainty arrived without a coping mechanism. I tried alternatives. Some indoor workouts. A bit of movement within confined spaces. But they felt hollow. Running had never been just an exercise. It was context. It was a distance. It was forward motion. Without that, everything else felt like a poor substitute.

As weeks turned into months, resignation replaced resistance. I stopped trying to sneak out. Stopped hoping for exceptions. Running, as I knew it, was not available. And that realisation carried a quiet grief with it. Something that had been woven into my life for years had been removed without warning, with no timeline for its return. What surprised me most was how deeply that absence registered. I had always thought of running as something I *did*. During lockdown, I realised it had become something I *was*. Without it, there was a sense of incompleteness that no amount of rationalisation could fix. This was not a dramatic loss, but it was real.

Eventually, the restrictions eased — unevenly, unpredictably. When I finally stepped out again, it wasn't triumphant. It was tentative. Short. Almost cautious. The body had stiffened. The

rhythm was gone. And yet, even that small movement felt like reclaiming a piece of myself. Looking back now, I can see that lockdown didn't test my endurance as a runner. It tested my relationship with control. Running had taught me patience, discipline, and resilience. COVID taught me helplessness. And in that helplessness, something else emerged — acceptance. Not the passive kind, but the understanding that some things cannot be forced, negotiated, or planned around. When running eventually returned, it did so stripped of expectation. No races. No timelines. No assumptions. Just movement, when allowed. Gratitude replaced ambition. Presence replaced progress. The obsession with performance, already fading, finally loosened its grip.

COVID didn't make me a better runner. It made me a more honest one.

It showed me that running was not guaranteed. That access itself was a privilege. And that is when movement is taken away; what you miss is not speed or distance, but freedom. That realisation stayed with me long after the roads reopened. When everything finally slowed down, running remained. Not in the way it had existed earlier — not wrapped in events, permissions, travel plans, or finish lines — but stripped down to its most basic form. Movement. Breath. Repetition. During COVID, when routines collapsed and calendars lost meaning, running shed everything ornamental and revealed what it had always been underneath. There were no races to train for. No bibs to collect. No medals to earn. No need to explain anything to anyone. Even the question of support or opposition from bosses became irrelevant. Suddenly, the world shrank to what could be managed within a few kilometres of where you lived. And still, I ran. Not every day. Not always well. Sometimes hesitantly, sometimes defiantly, sometimes simply because sitting still felt worse. The roads were emptier, quieter, almost unfamiliar. There was no

applause, no shared energy, no sense of participating in something larger. Running became a private conversation again, the way it had been in the very beginning — except now, it carried years within it. What struck me during that phase was not how much running I was doing, but how little it asked of me. It didn't demand ambition. It didn't insist on progress. It didn't punish inconsistency. It was content to exist as it was, showing up when it could, stepping back when it had to. That acceptance felt new, even though running had been teaching it to me for years.

Looking back over that long stretch — from my first marathon through postings, courses, ship duties, academic pressure, supportive bosses, unsupportive ones, ultras, event organisation, interruptions, restarts, and now a global pause — a pattern became clear. Running had never followed a straight line. It surged forward at times, fuelled by enthusiasm and opportunity. At other times, it receded quietly, pushed aside by responsibility or circumstance. It was sometimes central, sometimes peripheral. Sometimes joyful, sometimes frustrating. Often inconsistent. Rarely perfect. And yet, it never disappeared. That, more than any medal or distance, was the real story of those years. Running did not dominate my life. It adapted to it. It learned to coexist with deadlines, family moves, professional expectations, fatigue, and doubt. It survived phases where it was encouraged and phases where it was quietly disapproved of. It endured periods of obsessive participation and long spells of near-absence.

What remained constant was not volume or performance, but intent. Whenever space appeared — however small — running stepped into it. Whenever pressure mounted, it adjusted rather than rebelled. It didn't insist on being special. It was content being steady. That steadiness mattered more than I understood at the time. In a profession where intensity comes in waves and calm is rarely permanent, running became a place

where effort could be measured without consequence, where failure did not need explanation. Where progress was personal, not comparative. Over time, it stopped being something I *did* and became something I *returned to*. COVID made that truth impossible to ignore. When everything else was paused, when achievement lost its usual markers, when productivity was redefined daily, running stood there quietly, unchanged. It didn't offer solutions. It didn't promise improvement. It offered rhythm. And rhythm, I realised, is often what keeps you upright when certainty disappears. By then, my relationship with running had matured without my consciously shaping it. I no longer needed it to prove anything. I didn't require it to justify time away from work or family. I wasn't chasing validation or chasing speed. Running had earned its place by surviving long enough to be trusted.

Trust, I learned, is built slowly. Not through spectacular days, but through ordinary ones. Through showing up when motivation is absent. Through returning after interruptions without resentment. Through accepting that some phases will be strong and others fragile, and that both are part of staying in the game. As the world began to reopen tentatively, I sensed that something else was approaching. Not a race. Not a goal. Not a challenge in the traditional sense. Something subtler. A new negotiation with the body. A need to listen more carefully. To slow down without guilt. To understand effort differently than before. Those questions did not announce themselves loudly. They waited. Running, as it always had, stayed alongside me — unchanged in its presence, but quietly preparing me for a phase where persistence would matter more than performance, and awareness more than ambition. I did not know it then, but the long middle had done its work. It had taught me how to stay.

CHAPTER 17

Starting Again

*“You don’t stop running because you get old.
You get old because you stop running.”
- Christopher McDougall*

When the world began to reopen after COVID, it did so without fanfare. It eased back into motion cautiously, almost as if testing whether normal life could be trusted again. Offices reopened in phases, travel resumed hesitantly, and gatherings returned with a kind of restrained enthusiasm. Around the same time, I moved to a new posting: new place, new routines, new expectations. After the strange stillness of the pandemic years, stepping back into a structured professional rhythm felt both familiar and slightly overwhelming. The calendar regained authority. Meetings returned. Deadlines sharpened. Responsibilities, which had felt diffused during lockdown, became precise again. Running, which had survived the quiet months in a stripped-down form, now had to find its place in this restored order.

The first events to return were virtual. There was no start line, no holding area buzzing with nervous energy, no anthem, no collective countdown. Just a GPS watch, an early morning, and the quiet knowledge that somewhere, scattered across cities, other runners were stepping out alone. It felt slightly artificial, almost ceremonial, but without substance. Yet I did it anyway. Not because the medal would arrive by courier days later, but because the act of registering, showing up, and finishing restored something intangible. It re-introduced occasion into movement.

It reminded me that running could still have structure, even if the structure was temporarily imaginary.

Gradually, physical events returned. The first real race after the long pause felt different from anything I had experienced before. There were crowds, but they were thinner. Volunteers smiled, but from behind masks. Conversations were cautious. We stood at the start line not just with the usual pre-race nerves, but with an added layer of awareness about breath, lungs, and the invisible vulnerabilities they hold. For years, I had run with the quiet arrogance of assumed health. COVID had eroded that assumption. Standing there, I was not thinking about negative splits or personal bests. I was thinking about breath. About whether my body was as resilient as I had always believed it to be.

Physically, I was not in terrible shape. I had not allowed myself to drift completely during lockdown, but I was not sharp either. There was a little extra weight, a little less efficiency, and a noticeable difference in recovery time. What had changed more than my body, however, was my mindset. There was less urgency now. Less impulse to attack the distance. More willingness to observe what the body was doing rather than commanding it to comply. That said, the competitive instinct is not easily retired. In those early races back, I caught myself slipping into familiar patterns — starting slightly faster than necessary, measuring satisfaction through pace, glancing at the watch more often than required. Old habits rarely disappear; they wait patiently for opportunity.

It was during this phase that a new line of thought began to form, quietly but persistently. The pandemic has made heart health a topic of everyday discussion. News reports of sudden cardiac arrests during workouts, articles about long-term effects on endurance, stories of runners collapsing mid-race — all of it had entered common conversation. I would read these accounts

with a mixture of detachment and discomfort. On the surface, I dismissed them as rare occurrences. Underneath, something lingered. I was no longer in my thirties. Fatigue behaved differently now. Recovery was less automatic. While nothing was dramatically wrong, the assumption of invincibility had begun to feel outdated. That was when I decided to buy a new watch. One that could be measured by heart rate (HR).

Until then, my GPS watches had served a simple purpose: to measure distance, pace, and record time. This one came with continuous heart rate monitoring. I did not purchase it out of obsession or technological fascination. At least that is what I told myself. I framed it as curiosity, as prudence, as being informed. In truth, it was probably a mixture of curiosity and caution. The idea that I could see what my heart was doing in real time felt both empowering and mildly unsettling. The first few runs with the new watch were unremarkable. Numbers appeared on the screen, but I did not interrogate them deeply. If the run felt good, I continued. If it felt uncomfortable, I adjusted slightly. Heart rate was just another field among many, peripheral rather than central. Then one morning, mid-run, I looked more carefully. For a pace that felt comfortably hard, not sprinting, not racing, simply steady, my heart rate was climbing much higher than I had expected. I slowed deliberately and watched the numbers resist dropping quickly. I ran another day again, paying closer attention. The pattern repeated.

The initial reaction was surprise. After more than a decade of running marathons, ultras, and countless training miles, I believed I understood effort. I believed I knew my own body. Seeing those numbers consistently climb into zones that were theoretically unsustainable forced me to reconsider that assumption. Denial was almost instantaneous. Perhaps the strap was loose. Perhaps the sensor was inaccurate. I adjusted settings, tightened the watch, and repeated the experiment. The data

refused to cooperate with my denial. Irritation crept in next. Had I been running harder than necessary for years? Had I equated discomfort with effectiveness? Was I mistaking effort for wisdom? Beneath the irritation lay something quieter and more uncomfortable: fear. Not dramatic fear, not the kind that induces panic, but the type that asks a simple question mid-stride: is this sustainable? I did not want to outrun my body. I wanted it to last.

That thought, once formed, did not disappear. Until then, most of my decisions had revolved around participation, distance, and the satisfaction of finishing. Now, a different metric entered the conversation: longevity. Not just lining up for the next race, but still being able to line up ten years later. Not merely completing another marathon, but doing so without silently compromising the system that made it possible. I had not yet chosen a method or philosophy. I had not yet calculated target heart rates or studied training models in detail. But the recalibration had begun. Running was no longer only about demonstrating endurance. It was about preserving it, and that subtle shift would gradually reshape everything that followed.

Once I began paying attention to the numbers, it became impossible to ignore them. At first, I treated the heart rate data like background noise — a supplementary statistic, mildly interesting but not authoritative. But patterns have a way of insisting on being noticed. On runs that felt comfortably hard, the kind I had been doing for years without a second thought, my heart rate was consistently operating in zones that suggested strain rather than efficiency. What I had always considered “steady” appeared, in physiological terms, closer to aggressive. The discovery did not sit well. For years, I had believed that effort equated to progress. If a run felt challenging, I assumed it was productive. If I returned tired, I felt satisfied. Seeing the data disrupted that belief. It suggested that I had perhaps been

operating closer to my ceiling than I had realised. Not occasionally, but habitually.

The first instinct was to question the device. I experimented. I compared readings across runs. I slowed deliberately to observe how quickly my heart rate dropped, then accelerated to see how sharply it climbed. The numbers remained stubbornly consistent. Gradually, denial gave way to something less comfortable: introspection. Why was I so resistant to this information? Was it because it implied inefficiency? Or because it forced me to confront the possibility that I had been running with more ego than awareness? For over a decade, I had prided myself on endurance. Marathons, ultras, and frequent events had become markers of identity. The watch, in its silent, unemotional way, was suggesting that perhaps I had prioritised intensity over sustainability. The more I read, the more uneasy I became.

Post-COVID conversations about cardiac health had not disappeared. Research on long-term stress on the cardiovascular system was readily available. Articles discussing overtraining, elevated resting heart rates, and cumulative fatigue were no longer theoretical. I began reading about aerobic base building, running in lower heart-rate zones, and the concept of training the body to operate efficiently rather than forcefully. That was when I encountered the idea of MAF – Maximum Aerobic Function training.

On the surface, it sounded simple. Calculate a target heart rate based on age. Stay below it. Build aerobic capacity patiently. Let speed emerge organically rather than chase it. The logic appealed to me. The discipline required unsettled me.

Running slowly, deliberately slowly, felt counterintuitive. I remember calculating my MAF number and stepping out for the first dedicated attempt. Within minutes, I had to slow down dramatically to keep the heart rate under control. What I had

always considered an easy jog was now too fast. I found myself walking to prevent the numbers from crossing the threshold. Walking. After years of marathons and ultras. It was humbling.

It was also mildly embarrassing, even though no one else was watching. My ego, which had quietly enjoyed the identity of an endurance runner, struggled with the optics of moving at what felt like a recreational pace. The internal dialogue was relentless. Was this a regression? Was I overreacting to data? Should I instead focus on VO_2 max workouts, interval training, or sharpening performance? The temptation to return to intensity was strong.

The debate became a daily companion. On some mornings, I would begin with the intention of staying within the MAF range, only to accelerate unconsciously when the rhythm felt good. On other days, I forced myself to remain disciplined, even when it meant alternating between jogging and brisk walking. The boredom was real. Running had always offered a certain kinetic satisfaction. Slowing it down stripped away that immediacy.

I did not abandon speed entirely. There were still moments of competitive instinct. But the foundation had shifted. Heart rate became not an adversary but a guide. It introduced accountability without drama. It asked a simple question before each run: Are you training for today, or for the next decade? The answer, increasingly, was the next decade. What surprised me most during this phase was not the physiological benefit, but the emotional recalibration. Slowing down required surrendering a certain image of myself. It required accepting that improvement might be invisible for weeks. It required tolerating boredom. But it also offered something new, sustainability.

The watch had not merely given me data. It had exposed a pattern. I had been running hard because I could. Now I wanted to run wisely so that I could continue. That choice did not feel

heroic. It felt mature. And maturity, as I would soon learn, would be tested in ways I did not anticipate.

Understanding something intellectually is one thing. Living it is another. Once I had decided that longevity mattered more than speed, the practical implications began to surface in ways I had not fully anticipated. Running within a controlled heart rate range sounds straightforward when described in an article. In reality, it requires a kind of restraint that is harder than intensity. Pushing hard feels decisive. Holding back feels unnatural. The first few weeks of deliberate slow running were almost comical. I would start a run feeling fresh, confident in my resolve to remain within the calculated MAF range. Within minutes, the heart rate would creep upward, nudging past the number I had carefully memorised. I would slow down. The number would stabilise briefly, then climb again, as if mocking my discipline. Eventually, I would have to walk for a few seconds to bring it down. Walking, in the middle of what I would once have called an easy run, felt like a quiet assault on my self-image.

There was no one judging me except myself, and that made it worse.

For years, my identity as a runner had been tied, at least in part, to distance and persistence. I could run long. I could endure discomfort. Now I was negotiating with a wristwatch and taking walking breaks to appease a number on a screen. The absurdity was not lost on me. On more than one occasion, I caught myself thinking, MAF karo ya VO₂ pe jao (Focus on MAF or VO₂ max)? The old instinct to push harder had not retired; it had merely been asked to sit in the corner. Boredom became an unexpected adversary. Running slower stripped away the familiar sensation of forward momentum that comes with sustained effort. There were stretches where the pace felt almost pedestrian, where the mind wandered not into meditative calm but into mild irritation. Was this really training? Was I diluting

the very quality that had allowed me to complete marathons and ultras?

At the same time, curiosity kept me engaged. I began to observe subtle details that I had previously ignored. Breathing patterns became clearer. Foot strike felt lighter. I could hold conversations without strain. Recovery between runs improved noticeably. Instead of finishing depleted, I finished steady. The body, rather than feeling battered, felt cooperative. There was less soreness. Less heaviness in the legs the following morning. It was not dramatic, but it was consistent. Over time, the walking breaks reduced. The same heart rate began to produce slightly faster paces. Hills that once spiked my numbers aggressively became manageable with controlled effort. The improvements were incremental, almost invisible day to day, but undeniable over months. For the first time, progress felt like something that accumulated quietly rather than announced itself.

Races during this phase took on a different character. I still participated in half marathons, full marathons, and even another 50 K race. From the outside, nothing had changed. I pinned bibs, stood at start lines, and crossed finish lines. Internally, however, the objectives were recalibrated. Instead of chasing a personal best, I chased control. Instead of testing how much discomfort I could tolerate, I tested how consistently I could maintain composure. Slower finish times no longer irritated me. They informed me. This did not mean the ego disappeared entirely. There were moments, especially in crowded races, when someone would surge past, and the instinct to respond would flare up instinctively. The body remembers competition even when the mind advocates restraint. But more often than not, I let them go. It felt less like surrender and more like a strategy.

What surprised me most during this phase was how much mental space opened up once speed was no longer the central objective. Running became less transactional. I was not extracting

validation from each kilometre. I was accumulating durability. That shift softened something within me. The need to prove reduced. The need to preserve increased. Slow running also exposed impatience that I did not realise I carried. There were days when I resented the watch. Days when I longed for the simple satisfaction of pushing hard without consequence. Days when I questioned whether I was overcorrecting, swinging too far toward caution. Yet each time I reviewed the data and compared how I felt physically, the evidence supported the change.

The irony was clear. Slowing down required more discipline than speeding up. It demanded humility. It demanded consistency. It demanded the willingness to look ordinary while building something sustainable. Over months, what had initially felt like restriction began to feel like freedom. Freedom from constant strain. Freedom from the silent anxiety of whether I was overdoing it. Freedom from the idea that every run needed to justify itself through intensity. By the time this approach had settled into routine, I no longer saw it as a temporary experiment. It had become philosophy in motion. I was no longer running to see how fast I could go; I was running to see how long I could continue. That distinction altered not just training, but temperament. I did not know then that this recalibration would soon be tested in a way that had nothing to do with pace, heart rate, or discipline. When that test arrived, the lessons from this slow, patient phase would matter more than any finish time ever had.

From the outside, nothing about my racing calendar suggested transformation. I continued to register for events with the same regularity as before. Early morning alarms still rang with unreasonable insistence. Travel plans were made with military efficiency – leave on Friday afternoon, reach by evening, collect the bib on Saturday, run on Sunday, return by Monday morning. The choreography had not changed. What had changed was the

internal contract. Earlier, races had carried an undercurrent of quiet ambition. Even when I claimed not to care about timing, there was always a subconscious benchmark. A memory of a previous finish. A number I hoped to beat or at least approach. Now, the objective had shifted subtly but decisively. The goal was not to outperform a former version of myself. The goal was to leave the course feeling intact. That sounds modest. It is not.

Running long distances without accumulating hidden damage requires a different kind of discipline. It means starting deliberately slower than the surrounding surge. It means letting adrenaline settle instead of riding it. It means declining the invitation to chase every runner who overtakes you in the first five kilometres. Most importantly, it means listening when the body whispers rather than waiting for it to shout. In those races, I found myself more observant than competitive. I noticed breathing patterns early and adjusted before they became laboured. I paid attention to cadence rather than crowd energy. I allowed hills to dictate effort rather than ego. There were moments when the old instinct resurfaced, particularly as the finish line drew near and the crowd thickened, but even then the acceleration was measured. There was satisfaction in restraint.

Finish times reflected the shift. They were respectable (at least I would like to think that), but rarely aggressive. Slower than my earlier bests. What surprised me was how little that variability bothered me. Completing a half-marathon without pain felt like success. A marathon finished with steady heart rate control felt like competence. The 50K run with deliberate pacing and minimal distress felt like validation of the new approach. There was also an unexpected benefit: recovery improved noticeably. Instead of spending days limping or moving stiffly, I found myself returning to light activity sooner. The body felt less battered. The cumulative fatigue that had once seemed inevitable after longer

races reduced significantly. That, more than any medal, confirmed that the recalibration was working.

Around this time, I also became more comfortable speaking openly about running differently. Earlier, there had been a subtle defensiveness when explaining slower pacing. It felt like justification. Now it felt like clarity. I was not trying to maximise performance within a short window. I was trying to extend participation across decades. The distinction, once internal, became easier to articulate. Interestingly, the more relaxed I became about pace, the more enjoyable races felt. Without the pressure to prove something, I could appreciate details that had previously blurred into the effort. The way light shifted across the course at dawn. The different running styles of those around me. The quiet camaraderie at aid stations. Conversations with strangers who would disappear from my life as soon as the race ended, but felt like companions for those few kilometres.

I would occasionally glance at my heart rate mid-race and think about the version of myself from a few years earlier, who would have dismissed such caution as overthinking. That earlier version had run well. But this version ran wisely. Or at least, that was the intention. Through all of this, a subtle confidence grew. Not the loud confidence of personal bests or dramatic finishes, but the steady assurance that I understood my body better than before. I knew when to hold back. I knew when to push slightly. I knew when to accept that a day was not meant to be spent at speed. That understanding felt more valuable than any single result.

If someone had asked me then whether I felt I had mastered running, I would have laughed. Running does not allow mastery in that sense. It allows familiarity. It allows negotiation. It allows adaptation. What I felt during this phase was not mastery, but alignment. For the first time in years, I was not oscillating between intensity and interruption. I was not sprinting through

phases and then collapsing into enforced breaks. There was rhythm. Sustainable, unremarkable rhythm. The kind that does not attract attention but builds quietly. It is often during such steady phases that we assume continuity will persist indefinitely. When things are working, we subconsciously believe they will continue to do so. The body feels cooperative. The mind feels settled. The philosophy seems validated. And in that sense of equilibrium, we begin to trust the ground beneath us. I had begun to trust mine.

On 10 December 2023, I lined up for what was meant to be another long day on the trails. It was a challenging hill ultra. The air carried that early-morning chill particular to winter trail races. The terrain promised elevation, uneven footing, and technical sections. I felt steady. Not aggressive, not overly ambitious, but confident in the rhythm I had built over the past couple of years. My pacing was controlled. My breathing was measured. My heart rate sat comfortably within ranges I now respected. There was no premonition.

The fall happened, as ordinary accidents often do, a misjudged step while crossing a stream, a fraction of hesitation, a slight loss of balance. One moment, I was moving forward with deliberate caution, and the next, I was descending without consent. Instinctively, I extended my right arm to break the fall. The impact was immediate and sharp, a jolt that travelled from shoulder to spine in a split second. I knew something was wrong before I tried to stand. Pain has different textures. There is the dull ache of fatigue, the manageable sting of muscle strain, the burning protest of lactic acid. This was none of those. This was structural. Deep. Immovable. When I attempted to push myself upright, my right arm refused to cooperate. The shoulder felt disconnected, as if the joint and bone had lost their internal agreement.

A fellow runner pulled me up. I sat there for a few seconds longer than I would like to admit, not out of shock, but

calculation. Was it a dislocation? Could I manage the run and seek medical help later? Runners have an unfortunate tendency to negotiate with injury rather than accept it. I tried moving the arm again. The pain sharpened instantly. Negotiation ended. Help arrived, as it does in races. Fellow runners slowed. The event's medical support intervened. I was transported out, not in the triumphant manner of a finisher, but in the practical, subdued manner of someone whose day had ended prematurely. The irony was not lost on me. I had recalibrated the pace. I had a respected heart rate. I had chosen longevity over speed. And here I was, undone not by overexertion, but by gravity. The diagnosis confirmed what I already sensed. Fracture of the right humerus. Clean enough to require surgery. Serious enough to demand full immobilisation.

There is a particular humour in the human body's symmetry. For years, I had joked about my "right side", the right knee fracture, a right wrist injury from school days, and small irritations that felt like a pattern. Now the right shoulder had emphatically joined the list. I remember thinking, with a kind of dry disbelief, that perhaps something is not right with my right side.

Surgery followed quickly. Hospitals have a way of reducing identity. You are no longer a runner, an officer, a father, a participant in anything. You are a case. A procedure. A time slot. The operation was explained clinically – plates, screws, alignment. I listened with detached attentiveness. What I felt most strongly was not fear of the surgery itself, but frustration at immobility. The idea of not being able to run, not because of choice, but because of incapacity, unsettled me far more than the incision.

The first few days after surgery were a lesson in stillness. My arm was immobilised in a sling, secured against movement as if the body itself did not trust what had happened. Movements were calculated. Simple actions required calibration. Wearing a

shirt demanded a strategy. Tying shoelaces became a minor logistical exercise. Sleep had to be negotiated carefully. The body, which I had spent years training for endurance, now demanded patience. There is a peculiar indignity in depending on others for basic tasks when you are accustomed to self-sufficiency. What surprised me was not the physical pain, which was managed and expected, but the restlessness. Running had become a rhythm. Removing it abruptly created an emptiness that was difficult to articulate. I would find myself walking slowly in the evenings, one arm secured, the other swinging freely, watching other runners pass by. There was no envy exactly, but there was awareness. Awareness of interruption.

Six weeks of convalescence stretched longer than they sound. The body heals on its own timeline, indifferent to impatience. There were moments when I attempted to jog lightly during recovery, more out of stubbornness than wisdom. Each attempt was a reminder that healing cannot be accelerated through willpower. The shoulder resisted sudden movement. The surrounding muscles felt fragile. I had to concede, reluctantly, that this was not a battle to be won through intensity.

Physiotherapy became the new discipline. It began with motions so small they seemed inconsequential. Lift. Hold. Release. Repeat. At first, I resisted internally. Years of training had conditioned me to equate progress with visible strain — sweat, breathlessness, fatigue. This was none of those. This was repetition without drama. There were no endorphins, no satisfying exhaustion — only incremental mobility. If MAF had taught me restraint, rehabilitation taught me humility. Repetitive, small movements. Controlled exercises. Gradual range-of-motion work. There was no applause for lifting the arm five degrees higher than the previous week. No medal for regaining stability. Progress was measured in millimetres and patience. I

began to understand that recovery is training of a different sort. It demands consistency without drama.

What unsettled me more than the physical restriction was the forced stillness. Running had become a rhythm in my life. Removing it abruptly created an internal static. I would go for evening walks, one arm secured in the sling, the other moving freely, watching runners pass by. There was no resentment in those moments, only awareness. Awareness of interruption. Awareness that movement, once assumed, could be revoked at any time without warning. Impatience surfaced more often than I expected. I caught myself calculating timelines obsessively. How long before light jogging? How long before the full range of motion? Could I accelerate this process through discipline alone? The body, however, does not respond to negotiation the way training schedules do. It heals according to biology, not ambition.

In the quiet hours of those weeks, I revisited the decision I had made about longevity. I chose to run slower so I could run longer. The fall did not invalidate that choice. If anything, it reinforced the journey's unpredictability. No matter how carefully we calibrate effort, the body remains vulnerable. Bones break. Ligaments strain. Accidents occur. The difference now was perspective.

A few years earlier, such an injury might have triggered anxiety about lost performance, about regression, about starting over. This time, the dominant feeling was irritation, yes, but also acceptance. The body had been tested in a way I had not planned. It would need time. And time, I had already decided, was something I was willing to invest. The fall ended a race. It did not end running. That distinction, fragile but firm, sustained me through the stillness.

Over time, the physiotherapy exercises accumulated meaning. Movements that had felt trivial began to restore

strength. Muscles reactivated cautiously. Stability returned in fragments. There were setbacks, days when stiffness returned unexpectedly, days when progress seemed to stall, but there was also undeniable forward motion. The discipline I had cultivated through slow aerobic training now redirected itself toward rehabilitation. Repetition without spectacle. Patience without applause. When clearance for light activity finally came, I approached it carefully. The first attempt at jogging felt foreign. My stride shortened instinctively. I was acutely aware of balance, of arm swing, of any signal that might indicate strain. The heart rate remained calm; it was the mind that required reassurance. Each kilometre completed without sharp discomfort felt less like an achievement and more like a permission granted. Yet even then, I did not feel fully restored.

The shoulder moved, but cautiously. Strength had improved, but confidence lagged. I understood then that recovery is not merely structural repair; it is psychological recalibration. The body may heal before the mind trusts it again. That trust cannot be forced. It must be rebuilt. Running resumed in fragments. Short distances. Controlled efforts. No temptation to test limits. The recalibration I had embraced before the fall now felt less like philosophy and more like necessity. Longevity was no longer an abstract concept debated alongside heart rate zones. It was immediate and personal. The stillness had altered my relationship with motion. Where earlier I had chosen restraint out of wisdom, I now practised it out of respect. The body had demonstrated its vulnerability. It had also demonstrated its capacity to recover. What remained uncertain was not whether I would run again, but how I would run again. That question would find its answer in time, not in haste.

By July 2024, the shoulder had regained what a doctor would call functional normalcy. Strength had returned. Range of motion was acceptable. The plates and screws inside my right arm had

settled into quiet anonymity. On paper, I was recovered. In reality, I was still rebuilding trust.

A half-marathon presented itself at the right time. Not too soon, not too distant. When I registered, I did so without any internal negotiation about pace or performance. The objective was precise and uncomplicated: run from start to finish without pain. That was it. No clock chasing. No comparison to previous years. Just continuity.

Standing at the start line that morning, I was aware of the full arc that had led me there. The recalibration after COVID. The watch and its uncomfortable truths. The deliberate slowing down. The hill ultra and the fall. The sterile light of the operating theatre. The quiet monotony of physiotherapy. All of it stood behind me, not as drama, but as instruction.

When the race began, I resisted the familiar urge to surge with the crowd. The first few kilometres were measured. I paid attention not just to heart rate, but to sensation. The shoulder moved in rhythm, not perfectly perhaps, but without protest. Each arm swing felt like a small affirmation. There was a moment around the tenth kilometre when I consciously rolled the shoulder mid-stride, testing its response. It answered with cooperation.

The absence of pain can be as powerful as the presence of achievement. By the later stages of the race, I realised I was no longer anxiously monitoring the shoulder. I was running. Not aggressively, not defensively. Just running. The body felt aligned. The breathing was steady. The pace was controlled. When the finish line approached, I allowed myself a slight increase in effort, not to prove anything, but to honour the moment. Crossing that finish line did not produce the explosion of emotion that had accompanied my first marathon years earlier. It produced something steadier. Relief, yes. Gratitude, certainly. But above all,

confirmation. The body had healed. The recalibration had held. The philosophy had survived testing.

The medal placed around my neck that day symbolised something different from earlier ones. It was not proof of endurance. It was proof of patience. It did not celebrate speed. It acknowledged restraint. It did not validate ambition. It validated alignment. What struck me most in the days that followed was not the physical recovery but the clarity that had emerged from the entire sequence. I had spent years learning to push. I had then learned to slow down. Injury had forced me to stop. Recovery had taught me to respect process. And now, running again without pain, I understood something I had only vaguely sensed before.

Running is not a contest against distance. It is a conversation with time. For years, I had measured success in kilometres completed and events participated in. Now I began to measure it differently. Could I wake up on an ordinary weekday and step out for a run without apprehension? Could I adjust pace without ego? Could I accept variation without self-judgment? Could I prioritise continuity over intensity? Those questions mattered more than any finish time. The fall had exposed fragility. The recovery had revealed resilience. Together, they had reshaped my understanding of what it meant to be a runner at this stage of life. It was no longer about proving that I could endure extraordinary strain. It was about ensuring that ordinary movement remained possible for as long as possible. There is a certain quiet confidence that comes from knowing you have chosen sustainability over spectacle. It does not demand applause. It does not seek validation. It simply continues.

As I look ahead now, I do not see a checklist of distances waiting to be conquered. I see a path that asks different questions. What does it mean to run wisely? What does it mean to age without surrendering motion? What does discipline look like

when performance is no longer the primary currency? How does one balance ambition with acceptance? The recalibration that began with a heart rate monitor and was tested by a fractured humerus did more than alter my training. It altered my perspective. Every pace has its place, yes, but more importantly, every phase has its lesson. The exuberance of beginnings, the steadiness of the middle, the humility of interruption, and the gratitude of return all belong to the same journey. The half-marathon in July was not a comeback. It was a continuation. It was the body and mind agreeing, not to chase recklessly, not to retreat fearfully, but to proceed attentively. And that, I have come to understand, is where the real work begins.

PART-4

CHAPTER 18

The Cut-Off

“Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort.”

- John Wooden

I did not register for the 60K impulsively. I registered with unfinished business in mind. The run was being organised by the Border Security Force at Dholavira, Kutch, Gujarat. It was their first edition. Three categories were announced – 10K, 30K, and 60k. I had already run a 50K the previous October. I had also completed my first 12-hour stadium run, covering 60 kilometres, though most of it had been an exercise in disciplined walking rather than flowing movement. That 60K had satisfied me in one sense, but it had also left a small itch. I wanted to cover 60 kilometres again, this time more fluidly, in less time, without the artificial rhythm of a stadium loop.

So, when I saw the Dholavira run, I signed up for the 60k. It was only later, while going through the event details more carefully, that I noticed the cut-off. Eight hours. I read it again. For 60k. Eight hours is a familiar number in ultrarunning. It is commonly used as the cut-off for a road 50k. Even some of the more prestigious ultras in the country operate on that arithmetic. But for 60K, the equation shifts. Not dramatically, perhaps an extra hour, maybe ninety minutes, but meaningfully. Ultras, at least in my understanding, are not about compressing distance into speed. They are about time on feet, about steady negotiation with fatigue. People walk. People reset. People move forward without hurry. The clock exists, but it does not dominate.

Eight hours for 60K felt like endurance squeezed into urgency. I reached out to the organisers, not to ask for a favour or request special accommodation, but simply to clarify whether there had been an oversight. Perhaps the figure had been carried forward mechanically from a 50K template. The response was polite but firm. Eight hours. It would be manageable, they said. The course was flat. Conditions would be favourable. I knew my pace. That was the crux of it. I was not irritated because I doubted my ability to cover 60 kilometres. I was irritated because the frame felt misaligned. When endurance events begin to mirror marathon-style pressure, something subtle shifts in tone. The experience becomes less about staying and more about beating. Still, irritation is theoretical. Race day forces honesty.

The run began at 3:30 in the morning under a full moon. The road, known as the “Road to Heaven,” was starkly beautiful in the dark; wide, open, quiet. There were no street lights. The tar surface was laid properly but not perfectly even. Shadows pooled in uneven patches. The early kilometres passed in calm rhythm. The air was cool. For a while, the arithmetic of eight hours receded. Then reality entered in smaller increments. Twice I mis-stepped in the uneven darkness. Twice my right thigh absorbed an awkward jerk. Not dramatic enough to stop me immediately, but sharp enough to register. Fatigue from the Mumbai Marathon in January had not entirely dissolved either. I had assumed it had, but the body often keeps its own ledger. Race support was sparse. The first meaningful intake of food came only at the 25-kilometre mark. For an ultra, that felt delayed.

Individually, none of these was decisive. Together, they accumulated quietly. The 30K finish point appeared without ceremony. You crossed the 30K marker, and if you were doing the longer distance, you continued and took the turn that led into the extended loop of the 60k. It was not a crossroads in the

theatrical sense. It was an extension. As I approached that point, I slowed. The thigh was not injured, but it was signalling. The eight-hour arithmetic returned. Could I push through? Perhaps. Would I risk turning discomfort into something more stubborn? Possibly. Was this the day to force a timeline I had already questioned?

Earlier in my running life, pride might have got the better of me. I would have continued simply because I had registered for the 60k. Because backing off would have felt like a concession, because numbers, once declared, exert a quiet pressure. But I was no longer particularly interested in proving that I could meet someone else's clock. As I approached the 30K finish point, I paused briefly. There was no internal speech about courage or defeat — just assessment. I had come to run. I was running. The 30K would give me what I needed that day. The 60K would remain unfinished business, not a failure. So, I decided not to take the turn toward the extended loop. The rest of the run unfolded without incident. The thigh did not escalate. The pace remained steady. I crossed the 30K finish line cleanly, collected the medal corresponding to the distance I had completed, and walked away intact. The irritation that had flared weeks earlier had dissolved. In its place was something quieter, indifference. The eight-hour cut-off had not defeated me. It had simply defined a frame. I had chosen mine.

On the way back to home base, the episode lingered in my mind longer than the physical effort did. It was not really about Dholavira. It was not about the organisers. It was not even about the 60k. It was about cut-offs — who sets them, why we internalise them, and why we allow them to determine what counts. Because in running, as in life, the clock is always present. The question is whether it belongs to you. What unsettled me in Dholavira was not the eight-hour cut-off itself. It was the reflex it triggered in me. The reflex to calculate, to compare, to compress distance into

pace. I had seen that reflex before, long before ultramarathons entered my life. It had followed me through institutions, examinations, fitness charts, and race results. Somewhere along the way, speed had quietly become a habit.

We are trained to move quickly from an early age. In school, the faster learner is rewarded. In sports, the quicker runner is applauded. In professional life, the one who rises sooner is noticed. Even rest is often scheduled with efficiency. Time is rarely presented as something to inhabit; it is presented as something to manage. The subtle message, repeated often enough, becomes internalised: faster is better. When I began running seriously, I carried that habit with me. I did not articulate it then, but it was there. I wanted to see improvement in the minutes shaved off. I wanted to cover longer distances in shorter durations. The stopwatch became a companion I consulted frequently. Even when I claimed to be running for health or mental clarity, I checked the pace with quiet expectation. Running was personal, yes, but it was not entirely free from measurement.

The first cracks in that habit appeared when I began monitoring heart rate more consciously. Watching the numbers rise sharply at what I had considered an “easy” pace unsettled me differently. It forced a confrontation with sustainability. If I wanted to continue running for years, perhaps decades, I would have to slow down. Slowing down felt counterintuitive at first. It felt like a retreat. Yet over time, it revealed something unexpected: there was depth in steadiness that speed had obscured. Then came injury, which did not ask for negotiation. When my shoulder fractured and my right arm rested in a sling, speed ceased to be relevant. The body does not heal faster because the mind insists on it. The weeks of physiotherapy reintroduced me to movement measured not in kilometres per hour but in degrees of rotation. Recovery was dismantled

hurriedly. It replaced urgency with patience. When I eventually returned to running, the absence of pain mattered more than the presence of pace. By the time I stood in Dholavira facing the arithmetic of eight hours, I was not the same runner who once chased minutes. The irritation I felt was not because I doubted my capacity; it was because I had begun to value rhythm over acceleration. Ultras, to me, represented endurance without anxiety. The eight-hour frame seemed to reintroduce the habit of hurry into a space I had learned to approach calmly.

What struck me afterwards was not that the organisers had chosen a particular cut-off. They had every right to. What struck me was how quickly my mind defaulted to calculation. Could I squeeze more out of my stride? Could I convert walking into shuffling? Could I negotiate fatigue into marginal gains? The habit of hurry still lived inside me, even if I believed I had moved beyond it. Choosing the 30K that day was less about distance and more about refusing that reflex. It was a small act of realignment. I did not want to prove that I could bend my pace to someone else's clock. I wanted to run in a way that felt coherent with the phase I was in. There was a time when proving speed mattered to me. There was a time when matching benchmarks felt essential. That time has passed quietly, without announcement.

I do not reject speed. I respect those who run fast, who train hard to compress distance into impressive numbers. I understand the discipline that it requires. But I no longer equate speed with value. The body has its seasons. There are phases of ascent and phases of maintenance. There are periods when pushing is appropriate and periods when preserving is wiser. Maturity, perhaps, lies in recognising which season you are in. The deeper shift for me has been this: I have stopped confusing pace with progress. It is possible to move more slowly and yet grow. It is possible to decline a longer distance and yet deepen your practice. It is possible to finish in the middle of the pack

and yet feel entirely aligned with your effort. These were not insights I possessed in my twenties. They emerged gradually, shaped by fatigue, by recovery, by reflection. The culture around us often celebrates acceleration: quick success, rapid improvement, swift recovery, and early achievement. There is less visible celebration of continuity. Staying, repeating, returning and running at a pace that allows tomorrow's run to exist. That continuity does not photograph well. It does not generate dramatic headlines. But it builds quietly.

In that sense, the eight-hour cut-off was merely a mirror. It reminded me how much my relationship with running had shifted. Earlier, I might have attempted the 60K to avoid appearing limited. Now, I am comfortable acknowledging limits without equating them with defeat. That comfort is not complacency. It is calibration. Time still moves. Clocks still tick. Benchmarks still exist. But I am less hurried by them. I do not feel compelled to compress every effort into measurable improvement. Some runs are for testing. Others are for staying. Some distances are for expansion. Others are for consolidation. The wisdom, if it can be called that, lies in discerning the difference.

Dholavira did not teach me something entirely new. It confirmed something I had been learning slowly. The habit of hurry does not disappear on its own. It must be observed, questioned, and occasionally refused. When I chose 30K instead of 60K that day, I was not shrinking from a challenge. I was declining unnecessary urgency. Perhaps that is what this phase of my running life is about — not racing the clock, not rebelling against it, but deciding when it deserves authority and when it does not. The clock can measure how quickly I move. It cannot dictate how meaningfully I choose to.

If running has taught me anything over the years, it is that most of the urgency we carry is inherited. We do not always

generate it ourselves. We absorb it. We learn it by observation. We internalise it long before we examine it. In races, the clock is visible. In life, it is subtler. It appears in conversations. In comparisons. In phrases that begin with “by now you should have...” It rarely shouts. It insinuates. By a certain age, you should be faster. By a certain year, you should be further along. By a certain phase, you should have achieved something measurable.

The difficulty is not that these timelines exist. The difficulty is that we rarely question who wrote them.

When I began running longer distances, I quietly assumed progression had a pattern. First, you run a 10K comfortably. Then you graduate to a half-marathon. Then you complete a few halves before attempting a full. Ultras come later, after years of conditioning. That is the commonly accepted arc. I did not follow that arc neatly, as my first marathon itself proved. But even then, the idea of progression lingered in the background. Improvement had to be linear. Distances had to increase. Pace had to decrease. It took me years to realise that this linear model was something I had borrowed. In reality, my running life has never followed a straight incline. There were periods of expansion when I was running frequently, travelling to events, and experimenting with distance. There were phases when professional demands reduced running to sporadic sessions. There were stretches where injury halted everything. If I had judged those quieter phases by borrowed timelines, I would have declared regression. But they were not regressions. There were pauses within continuity. The same pattern repeats outside running. People measure careers by speed of advancement. Friendships by frequency of contact. Health by visible markers. Even hobbies are quietly ranked by seriousness and output. If you are not improving rapidly, the assumption is that you are stagnating. Yet not all growth is visible. Not all progress accelerates.

There was a time when I looked at runners younger than me and felt the faint whisper of comparison. They were quicker, lighter, seemingly more resilient. It would have been easy to measure myself against their pace and conclude that there was a decline. But that would have been comparing different seasons. Youth carries elasticity. Experience carries endurance. Each has its own texture. Borrowed timelines ignore texture. They assume uniformity where none exists. They flatten experience into numbers. They imply that deviation is a deficiency. In reality, deviation is often adaptation. When I shifted to slower, heart-rate-based running, it appeared externally to be a reduction in performance. Internally, it was an investment in longevity. When I declined to chase the 60K within eight hours, it could have been labelled a compromise. In truth, it was calibration.

What I have come to understand is that most pressure is comparative. It gains strength when we look sideways. In the military, cohorts move together through courses and postings, and comparison becomes instinctive. In running communities, finish times are published openly, and comparison is effortless. There is nothing inherently wrong with comparison; it can motivate and sharpen. The trouble begins when it becomes the only lens. There is a quiet dignity in moving at a pace that suits your season. It does not generate applause. It does not always produce headlines. But it produces sustainability. I have come to value sustainability more than spikes. A dramatic personal best feels exhilarating, but it fades quickly. A steady year of injury-free running feels less dramatic and far more meaningful.

Borrowed timelines also assume uniform desire. They presume that everyone wants the same outcome at the same speed. In running, that is visibly untrue. Some run for podiums. Some run for finish lines. Some run to lose weight. Some run to stay sane. If goals differ, why should timelines be identical? The older I grow, the more I recognise that self-imposed urgency

often masquerades as ambition. Ambition has its place. It propels effort. But urgency without reflection creates strain. When I was younger, strain felt like proof of seriousness. Now, it feels like a warning. There is a difference between working hard and rushing unthinkingly.

Dholavira, in retrospect, was less about a cut-off and more about resisting borrowed urgency. I did not want to compress my relationship with distance into someone else's frame simply because it existed. I did not want to accept a timeline without asking whether it aligned with my intent. Perhaps that is the subtle evolution underway. I am no longer in a phase where I need to accelerate to validate myself. I am in a phase where continuity matters more than spectacle. Running remains the backbone of this journey, but what it has revealed applies far beyond kilometres. It has shown me that time is not only something to beat; it is something to inhabit.

When I lace up now, I do not ask how quickly I can finish. I ask whether the run will leave me able to return tomorrow. That question is small. It does not sound ambitious. Yet it contains a quiet rebellion against borrowed timelines. It prioritises staying over sprinting. We inherit many clocks. Some are useful. Some are aspirational. Some are irrelevant. The work, perhaps, is to discern which deserve obedience and which deserve indifference. Running has become my laboratory for that discernment. On the road, decisions are immediate and visible. In life, they unfold slowly. But the principle remains. Move at a pace that allows you to continue. Everything else is noise.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped asking permission. Not from organisers, not from timing charts, not from comparison tables, and certainly not from the imaginary committee that lives in our heads and evaluates every decision. The committee is very efficient, by the way. It meets frequently, issues judgments swiftly, and rarely sleeps. Earlier in my running life, I consulted it often.

Should I attempt this distance? Should I try to improve this timing? Should I prove that I still can? It was exhausting keeping up with its minutes of meeting. The Dholavira decision felt small at the time. It was only 30 kilometres instead of 60. No banners fell. No headlines were written. The earth did not tilt on its axis. But internally, something shifted. I realised I did not owe the longer distance a demonstration. I did not owe the clock an argument. I did not even owe my past performances consistency. I owed myself coherence. There was a time when coherence meant pushing. When coherence meant proving that injury had not slowed me, that age had not dulled me, that endurance still lived where it once did. That time had its place. Ambition is not a villain. But ambition without reflection becomes noise. It begins to sound like panic disguised as discipline.

Running without permission does not mean running carelessly. It does not mean ignoring structure or dismissing preparation. It means choosing your frame consciously. If I register for a 50K with a ten-hour cut-off, I do so knowing what that frame demands. If I decline a 60K because the arithmetic feels compressed, I do so without resentment. The difference lies not in the distance but in the emotional contract I enter. The older version of me might have interpreted scaling down as shrinking. The current version understands it as calibration. Bodies change. Priorities change. Seasons change. What remains constant is the act of showing up. That constancy does not require spectacle. It requires repetition. There is humour in this, if I allow myself to see it. For years, I chased numbers with the seriousness of someone negotiating national treaties. Five minutes faster. Two kilometres longer. One more loop. As if the universe were maintaining a ledger and waiting to reward or penalise accordingly. It took me embarrassingly long to realise that the universe is not particularly invested in my splits. It is I who was invested, sometimes excessively.

Perhaps that is what ordinariness has given me, perspective. I am not an elite runner negotiating sponsorship contracts. I am not chasing qualification standards for international events. I am a man who enjoys running, who has found in running steadiness, companionship, and a finisher medal that I quietly admire at home. The stakes, when I strip them of ego, are beautifully modest. Running without permission also means accepting that some days will be slower, some distances shorter, some attempts unfinished. It means resisting the urge to dramatise every deviation. Not every scaled-back run is a crisis. Not every missed distance is a commentary on decline. Sometimes it is simply the body asking for pragmatism.

In this sense, the eight-hour cut-off did me a favour. It exposed the remnants of urgency still lodged in me. It allowed me to observe them, smile at them, and move on. I could have attempted the 60K and perhaps finished within the window. Or perhaps not. Either way, the medal would have been metal, the distance would have been recorded, and life would have continued. What mattered more was the quiet clarity of choice. Over the years, running has moved from proving something to preserving something. Preserving health. Preserving rhythm and preserving a space that is mine, regardless of rank, title, or recognition. When I lace up now, I do not feel the need to justify the pace. If it is slow, it is slow. If it includes walking breaks, so be it. The run exists for me; I do not exist for the run.

There is a peculiar freedom in accepting that you are ordinary. Not average in effort, not mediocre in discipline, but ordinary in placement. Middle of the pack. Finisher. Participant. It removes the burden of spectacle. It allows you to enjoy the event without negotiating self-worth at every timing mat. If I complete within the cut-off, I am content. If I must step aside and try another day, I am content. The contentment is not resignation. It is understood that staying in the game matters

more than dominating it. And perhaps that is the direction this journey has been quietly moving toward, not toward faster finishes or longer distances, but toward alignment. Toward a relationship with running that does not oscillate violently with external metrics. Toward a place where effort guarantees meaning, even if it does not guarantee applause.

There will be more races. There will be more clocks. There will be more decisions at invisible junctions where one path extends, and another concludes. I cannot control the frameworks. I cannot rewrite every cut-off. But I can decide how much authority they hold over my peace. In the end, running without permission is not rebellion. It is quiet ownership. And ownership, I am beginning to realise, is the real finish line.

CHAPTER 19

Among My Own

“Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort.”

-John Wooden

At large-city marathons, the start line is always a series of corrals arranged by expected finish times. The faster runners assemble up front, shoulders relaxed, strides loose, conversations minimal. The latter corrals are denser, louder, and more restless. That is usually where you will find me. Not because I arrived late, not because I missed qualification standards, but because that is where my pace naturally places me. Over the years, I have grown accustomed to that positioning. I stand there without resentment and without aspiration to migrate forward artificially. It is not a demotion. It is geography.

In the later corrals, there is less posturing and more nervous laughter. Watches are checked more frequently, but mostly to ensure they are functioning before the race begins. People stretch a little awkwardly. Someone adjusts shoelaces for the third time. Someone else looks around, taking in the scale of the crowd with quiet awe. There are seasoned runners here, certainly, but there are also first-timers who have trained for months to cross a particular distance. The air carries anticipation, not pressure. I feel at home in that air.

There was a time when I might have glanced ahead and wondered what it would take to start closer to the front. Not necessarily to compete with the elite, but to belong to a corral that moved sooner when the gun went off. That curiosity has

faded. I know my pace. I know the rhythm my body prefers. Starting earlier would not make the kilometres shorter. It would only rearrange the order of movement. Comfort, I have realised, is an underrated emotion at the start line. Comfort does not mean complacency. It does not mean lack of ambition. It means alignment between expectation and ability. I know I am not there to compete. I am there to complete. I am there to measure myself against the distance, not against the field. That clarity simplifies everything. When the race begins, and the corrals ahead start to thin out, we in the later sections wait our turn. There is no embarrassment in that waiting. It is part of the design. Eventually, the human tide moves forward, and the start line that seemed distant a few minutes earlier appears underfoot. The timing mat beeps. The race, officially, has begun. For me, it always feels slightly symbolic. I am not launching into speed. I am stepping into commitment.

The first few kilometres in the later corrals are rarely smooth. The density of runners' forces patience. You cannot surge recklessly even if you wish to. Perhaps that is a blessing. It prevents early bravado. It reminds you that endurance is not a sprint in disguise. You settle into your natural cadence gradually, not dramatically. Looking around, I often notice something that does not make it into race reports. The majority of runners around me are neither chasing podiums nor fearing elimination. They are chasing something quieter. For some, it is a personal milestone. For others, it is a promise made to themselves months ago. Runners are carrying small flags or runners who have taped motivational lines to their wrists. None of them looks ordinary in that moment. They look focused.

It is easy to statistically dismiss the middle of the pack. If performance is measured strictly by placement, then the middle is anonymous. No spotlights linger there. No announcers shout those names. Yet the emotional intensity in those corrals is no

less than at the front. In some ways, it is more varied. There is relief when training has gone well, anxiety when it has not, and gratitude for simply being injury-free on race day. I do not feel invisible there. I feel integrated. Perhaps that is what ordinariness has meant to me over the years. Not invisibility, but integration. I am part of the wide band of runners who train consistently, respect the distance, finish more often than they fail, and return. I do not stand out. I stand with. This stance has reshaped my understanding of performance. Earlier in life, achievement felt vertical. You either climbed or you did not. In running, especially in the middle of the pack, achievement feels horizontal. You move forward alongside others, not ahead of them. The satisfaction does not come from overtaking hundreds of participants; it comes from maintaining rhythm, from not yielding when fatigue whispers.

There is a quiet democracy in the later corrals. Shoes vary widely in brand and wear. Some runners carry expensive hydration vests; others rely entirely on aid stations. Some have years of experience; others have trained for their first serious distance. Yet when the race begins, those differences blur. We share the same road, the same aid stations, the same gradual accumulation of tiredness. In that shared tiredness, something subtle happens. The illusion of hierarchy softens. A runner who appears strong in the first ten kilometres may struggle later. Someone who started cautiously may move steadily past others in the second half. The field reorganises itself organically. In that dynamic movement, I have found reassurance. Placement is not destiny. It is fluid.

Being in the later corrals also strips away a certain kind of pressure. There is no expectation of spectacular splits. There is no commentary predicting your finish time. The race is yours to navigate privately, even within a crowd. You are accountable primarily to yourself. That accountability, for me, has always

been the more demanding one. I do not romanticise ordinariness. I do not claim it as a badge of virtue. It is simply where I reside on the spectrum. I am not fast. I am not exceptionally gifted. But I am consistent. I have shown up across years, across postings, across injuries and recoveries. That consistency places me among the many, not the few. And in recent years, I have begun to appreciate that many are who sustain the sport. Without the thousands who train quietly, who pay entry fees, who wake before dawn to run, the spectacle of racing would shrink dramatically. The elites may define the outer limits of human speed, but it is the ordinary runners who define the culture of participation.

Standing in those latter corrals now, I feel something that resembles contentment. Not because I lack ambition, but because I no longer confuse ambition with comparison. I run at the pace I can sustain. I accept the corral that corresponds to that pace. I take my place in the crowd without apology. It has taken me years to arrive at that comfort. Ordinariness, I have realised, is not a deficiency. It is a demographic. And within that demographic lies a quiet resilience that rarely makes headlines but often makes finish lines.

If you stand at any major marathon and look not at the front but at the stretch of road behind you, what you will see is not chaos. It is a pattern. A slow, steady wave of human intention stretching farther than the eye can comfortably measure. The elites are few. The podium has space for three. The timing mats will record thousands. Most of us will finish somewhere between impressive and anonymous. It took me a while to understand that this is not a flaw in the system. It is the system.

In statistical terms, the middle is where most outcomes gather. In emotional terms, the middle is where most stories live. The runner who finishes in two hours and ten minutes will receive headlines. The runner who finishes in six and a half hours

may receive sympathy or admiration. The runner who finishes in five hours will receive neither. He will receive a medal, a refreshment packet, perhaps a handshake, and then he will walk home. Yet his preparation was not small. His effort was not diluted. His fatigue is not theoretical. The mathematics of the middle does not flatter the ego, but it protects sanity.

When I first began participating in longer races, I would check the results sheet after every event. Not obsessively, but with curiosity. Where had I placed in my age category? How far behind the leader was I? How close to the median? It was not insecurity so much as habit. The system offers numbers; we naturally read them. Over time, I noticed something almost comical. Regardless of the city, the distance, or whether it was a marathon, an ultra, or a half, I hovered around similar percentile bands. Not disastrous. Not dazzling. Dependable. It was as if the distribution had already decided my neighbourhood. There is something oddly liberating about realising that you are statistically consistent. You stop imagining sudden leaps into the top ten per cent without corresponding changes in training volume or genetic inheritance. You stop fearing dramatic collapse into the bottom ranks unless injury intervenes. You understand your range. Within that range, you operate.

The middle is not a stagnant zone. It is dynamic. Runners drift forward and backwards across it. A good training cycle nudges you slightly upward. A busy professional phase pushes you slightly downward. A disciplined year keeps you steady. But you rarely escape the band entirely. And most of us live our athletic lives inside it. There is quiet humour in the way we sometimes treat the middle as though it were failure. If a race has ten thousand participants and you finish 4,800th, you are exactly where statistics expect you to be. Yet the human mind prefers to imagine itself as an exception rather than the rule. We do not wake up thinking, "Today I will participate predictably." We

wake up thinking, “Maybe today I will surprise myself.” Surprises do happen. Personal bests occur. Unexpected strength surfaces. But the deeper satisfaction I have come to value is not surprise. It is reliability.

The middle pack is full of reliable people. They are not reckless starters who sprint and collapse dramatically. They are not spectators masquerading as participants. They are the ones who trained just enough, who prepared within constraints, who show up consistently. Their preparation may not be Instagram-worthy, but it is real. Early morning runs before office. Late evening jogs after family dinners. Long runs negotiated around commitments. They build quietly. And when race day arrives, they take their place in the corrals without delusion. If you watch closely in the middle kilometres of a marathon, you will notice something subtle. Conversations emerge. Not because the effort is trivial, but because the pace allows brief exchanges. Someone asks where you are from. Someone comments on the humidity. Someone jokes that they will never sign up for another race again, even though both of you know that statement has an expiration date. There is camaraderie in shared strain.

The elites run mostly in isolation, even when surrounded by competitors. The middle runs in the community. This community is not always visible from the outside. It does not produce dramatic rivalries or media narratives. But it produces continuity. Year after year, the same broad demographic fills entry lists. The names change slowly. The faces age gradually. But the participation remains steady. I began to see this continuity more clearly when I attended races not only as a participant but also as an observer. Standing near the finish line after completing my own run, I would watch others arrive. Some sprint the final stretch with unexpected reserves. Some walk stubbornly, refusing to stop entirely. Some look stunned that they

have made it. The finish line volunteers do not discriminate based on time. Every medal is placed with the same gesture.

In that gesture lies something profound. The middle may not generate headlines, but it generates volume. Without volume, there is no event. Without ordinary runners, there is no culture of running. There are no local clubs, no weekend group runs, no collective dawn rituals. The sport would shrink into a narrow professional lane. Understanding this did not inflate my ego. It grounded it. I am not part of a rare breed. I am part of a large, committed, often overlooked majority. The majority carries the sport forward not through speed but through presence. Presence is underrated. It does not appear on leaderboards. It does not trend. But it accumulates. The runner who has completed ten marathons in five years at steady times may not excite commentators. Yet that runner embodies discipline in its most sustainable form.

I have often found myself smiling at the absurdity of obsessing over minor positional shifts within the middle. If I improve by three minutes in a race of thousands, my percentile might shift slightly. The medal remains identical. The road does not remember the difference. The body remembers the effort, not the ranking. This is not to dismiss improvement. Improvement is satisfying. It validates training decisions. It reassures you that effort translates into outcome. But improvement within the middle does not alter identity. It refines experience.

There is, I think, a quiet confidence in accepting that you are statistically ordinary and emotionally invested. The two are not contradictory. In fact, they complement each other. Because the expectation of spectacle does not burden you, you can focus on consistency. When I line up in later corrals now, I do not scan ahead, imagining upward migration. I scan sideways. I see runners like me — people who have rearranged life slightly to

make room for distance. People who are not here for applause but for completion. People who understand that the finish line will not transform them into someone else. It will confirm who they already are. The mathematics of the middle does not diminish effort. It contextualises it. And in that context, ordinarieness begins to look less like mediocrity and more like membership.

There is a point in every race when calculation stops, and instinct takes over. It usually happens in the final stretch, when the finish arch is visible but still distant enough to require effort. The body is no longer fresh enough for vanity, and the mind is no longer interested in splits. It is interested in one thing only: reaching. For an ordinary runner, that final stretch carries a peculiar intensity. It is not the intensity of competition; it is the intensity of closure. The distance has been negotiated kilometre by kilometre. Doubt has visited and been dismissed. Fatigue has made its argument repeatedly. Yet here you are, still upright, still moving forward.

I have crossed many finish lines over the years. A few after 10 kilometres. Some after half marathons. Some after full marathons. Even a few after ultras that felt longer than the numbers suggested. What has remained constant is the sensation in the final hundred metres. The breathing is heavy but controlled. The legs feel thick, as though they belong to someone else. The crowd noise, if there is any, becomes background texture. You are aware of it, but not dependent on it. Then you cross. The timing mat beeps, almost casually. There is no trumpet announcing your arrival. There is no spotlight isolating your effort. Yet something inside settles immediately. The task is complete. You did not quit.

It is in the seconds after crossing that the medal appears. An anonymous volunteer, often younger than you, sometimes older, stands with a tray or a cluster of ribbons draped over an arm.

Their expression is not evaluative. It is warm, efficient, and perhaps routine for them, but never routine for you. They lift the ribbon and place it over your head with a small, practised motion. Sometimes they say “Well done.” Sometimes they smile silently. Sometimes they clap lightly as they move on to the next finisher. In that moment, pride rises unexpectedly. Not loud pride. Not the kind that demands acknowledgement. A quieter form. The kind that acknowledges private preparation now made visible. The medal is not heavy in absolute terms, but it feels substantial. It rests against a chest that is still rising and falling rapidly. Sweat has not yet dried. Salt crusts at the edges of the skin. The body is tired, but the mind is alert.

There is validation in that small piece of metal. You showed up. You endured. You stayed. For the elite runner, the medal may represent placement. For the ordinary runner, it represents completion. It is not proof that you were the fastest. It is proof that you were faithful to the distance. I have seen faces at finish lines that are difficult to forget. The runner who finishes their first 10K, eyes wide with disbelief that the body could carry them that far. The half-marathoner who limps across within the cut-off, pain etched clearly, yet smiling as though they have discovered something unexpected. The veteran ultra runner who arrives steadily, neither collapsing nor celebrating wildly, nods at the volunteer as if acknowledging an old ritual. The happiness is intense, but not theatrical. It never becomes routine.

Even after multiple finishes, even after the novelty has faded externally, internally, there is always a brief flicker of wonder. The distance was not guaranteed. Training did not eliminate uncertainty. On race morning, something could always go wrong. Yet here you are, medal in hand, breathing deeply, absorbing the moment. I have often walked a few steps away from the immediate congestion at the finish line to hold the medal and look at it. Not to admire its design, though some are more

elaborate than others, but to feel its presence. It is tangible evidence of intangible effort. The early alarms. The missed social engagements. The discipline to run despite low motivation. The negotiations with injury and fatigue. None of that is visible on the medal. Yet all of it is contained within it.

We know, rationally, that the medal is standard issue. Every finisher receives the same design. It is not personalised to your struggle. It does not adjust its weight according to how close you came to quitting at kilometre thirty-two. And yet, when it rests around your neck, it feels yours uniquely. For a few minutes, you are both anonymous and singular. The medal does not make you extraordinary in the eyes of the world. Strangers will not pause to ask about your finish time as you walk home. The city continues uninterrupted — traffic resumes. Offices open. But inside, something has shifted subtly. You have tested your body against distance and emerged intact. You have chosen to endure discomfort voluntarily and completed the arc. That voluntary endurance is what elevates the ordinary.

Anyone can sign up. Not everyone shows up. Anyone can start. Not everyone refuses to quit when the initial enthusiasm fades. The medal, then, is not a reward for speed. It is an acknowledgement of persistence. I remember, after certain races, clutching the medal rather than letting it hang, as if to confirm that it was real. There is a childlike quality to that gesture, perhaps. But there is also sincerity. The world may not measure your effort dramatically, but the finish line does. The volunteer, who does not know your profession, your rank, or your background, recognises you only as a finisher. In that recognition lies equality.

The later corrals empty slowly into the finish chute. The middle of the pack produces the longest sequence of medal placements. It is almost assembly-line in appearance. Yet for each runner, the experience is singular. I have seen men in their

forties discreetly wipe tears. I have seen young runners laugh uncontrollably out of sheer relief. I have seen veterans walk straight through, already planning the next race. For me, the dominant emotions remain pride and validation. Not because I defeated others, but because I remained with myself. The distance did not intimidate me into withdrawal. The fatigue did not persuade me to abandon. That knowledge lingers longer than the physical soreness.

Later, at home, when the medal rests on a table or joins others on a hanger, it loses some of its immediacy. It becomes part of a collection. But at the finish line, in those brief seconds when it is placed around your neck, it is more than decoration. It is an affirmation. Ordinary runners may not experience podium ceremonies. We may not hear our names announced over loudspeakers. But we experience something just as powerful. The quiet, unmistakable acknowledgement that effort guarantees meaning. And in that moment, standing among hundreds who have done the same, ordinariness feels anything but small.

If you observe enough finish lines, something becomes evident that no leaderboard can fully capture. The extraordinary moments in running do not belong exclusively to the extraordinary runners. They belong to the effort itself. They belong to the act of staying. In the middle of the pack, there is no illusion of spectacle. There is no expectation of applause beyond polite clapping and perhaps the cheer of a stranger who will forget your face in the next minute. Yet the emotional intensity at that finish line is undeniable. It is visible in trembling hands, in the way runners bend slightly forward after stopping, in the deep inhalations that feel like relief made audible. What transforms that ordinary body, that statistically predictable finisher, into someone momentarily luminous is not speed. It is a commitment sustained over time.

Ordinariness, I have come to understand, is not the absence of greatness. It is the absence of exaggeration. It is effort without amplification. It is discipline without an audience. The ordinary runner trains when no one is watching and finishes when no one is expecting. The medal, as small and standardised as it is, acknowledges that invisible preparation. There was a time when I believed that greatness required exceptionality. To matter, one had to rise distinctly above the field. Running has quietly dismantled that assumption. The field itself is where meaning resides. The thousands who wake before dawn, who negotiate their schedules to fit in kilometres, who return year after year without podium ambitions, create a culture more durable than any single victory. In that culture, pace is contextual.

The fastest runner has a place. So does the last finisher. So does the vast majority in between. The start line does not discriminate against ordinary ambition. The finish line does not withhold recognition based on percentile. It acknowledges completion. It honours continuity. The phrase “*Every pace has a place*” began as something I told myself when I could no longer run as fast as I once did. It felt like consolation at first. Over time, it became a conviction. Pace is not merely a number on a watch. It is an expression of where you are in your life, in your training cycle, in your emotional bandwidth. It shifts with age, responsibility, recovery, injury, and wisdom. To insist that only the fastest pace carries meaning is to misunderstand endurance entirely.

In ultras, especially, this becomes obvious. The distance does not negotiate. It does not care about your previous personal best. It cares about whether you can remain upright, moving forward, and patient. Many walk. Many slow dramatically. Yet they finish. The applause does not diminish because the pace does. The world outside sport often celebrates peaks — promotions, awards, distinctions, milestones that elevate one

above the other. Running, particularly from the middle, celebrates persistence. It rewards the capacity to return. That return may not trend, but it accumulates. When I look at the medals collected over the years, I do not see a catalogue of extraordinary performances. I see a record of continuity. Each medal corresponds to a season of life, some professionally demanding, some personally smooth, some physically resilient, some fragile. The times printed in official results matter less now than the memory of showing up despite circumstances.

Ordinariness, in that sense, is durable. It does not depend on singular brilliance. It depends on repeat participation. It does not require dramatic reinvention. It requires modest, steady commitment. It is less glamorous, but more sustainable. There is humour in recognising that the qualities that sustain ordinary runners are the same qualities that sustain ordinary lives. No one applauds daily discipline. No one photographs the alarm clock that rings at four in the morning. No one records the quiet decision not to quit at kilometre thirty-two. Yet these are the decisions that add up to something substantial. When an ordinary runner crosses a finish line, what is being celebrated is not superiority. It is endurance chosen voluntarily. It is the acceptance of discomfort as part of the growth process. It is the refusal to collapse into excuses. And perhaps that is where the extraordinary hides. Not in the spotlight. Not in the headline. But in the steady refusal to stop.

Standing in later corrals, finishing in middle percentiles, collecting medals that look identical to thousands of others, I no longer feel diminished by ordinariness. I feel connected to it. The extraordinary is not a separate tier reserved for a few. It is an emergent quality that appears whenever effort is sustained long enough. You do not need to be first to feel proud. You do not need to be the fastest to feel validated. You need only to remain.

That understanding did not arrive suddenly. It evolved over races, over injuries, over recalibrations of pace and expectation. It matured when I stopped negotiating with time and started negotiating with myself. It solidified each time a medal rested against a chest that had chosen endurance over withdrawal. The ordinary runner may never occupy the podium. But he occupies the road. He occupies the early morning silence. He occupies the start line with quiet resolve. He occupies the finish chute with relief and pride. And by consistently occupying those spaces, he transforms them.

As this journey moves toward its closing reflections, I find myself less interested in proving that ordinary can be extraordinary and more interested in understanding why we ever separated the two. The line between them was thinner than I assumed. Running merely revealed it. In the end, perhaps the most extraordinary act is not to outrun the crowd, but to remain within it with dignity. And to keep showing up.

CHAPTER 20

The Road at My Pace

"It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end."

- Ursula K. Le Guin

Running has been a companion for more than a decade of my adult life, yet it has not transformed me into someone else. It did not elevate me into the ranks of the extraordinary, nor did it grant me abilities that defied age or circumstance. If anything, it clarified my limitations with quiet precision. The stopwatch does not flatter. The distance does not exaggerate. The body responds honestly. Over time, I have come to appreciate honesty more than any inflated sense of achievement.

Running did not make me faster than my peers in any dramatic way. I improved in the early years, as most beginners do. The body adapts. The lungs learn. The legs cooperate. But I never crossed into a category that would make others pause and take notice. My times settled into a predictable band. They fluctuated with training cycles and life's interruptions, but they never leapt into extraordinary territory. The improvement curve, which once felt steep and encouraging, eventually flattened. That flattening was not a failure. It was a reality.

Running did not shield me from injury. I have limped off courses. I have fallen. I have experienced the frustration of watching fitness dissolve during recovery. The right side of my body has carried its share of reminders - knee, shoulder, wrist; as if to insist that endurance is negotiated, not assumed. There were weeks when I could not run at all and months when I had to

rebuild from what felt like zero. Running did not make me invincible. It made me aware of fragility.

Nor did running simplify life's other complexities. Professional responsibilities continued. Promotions came or did not come based on systems larger than me. Family life moved with its own rhythm — bills needed paying. Children grew. The world outside the running route remained indifferent to my mileage. A good long run did not guarantee a smooth week at work. A personal best did not eliminate ordinary disappointments. Running did not solve life. It accompanied it.

In the early years, I may have secretly hoped that sustained effort in one domain would spill over into effortless success in others. That discipline on the road would automatically translate into recognition elsewhere. Reality proved more nuanced. Discipline does transfer, but it does not control outcomes. Running taught me to distinguish between effort and entitlement. You can train diligently and still not achieve a particular time. You can prepare thoroughly and still face unforeseen setbacks. That lesson extended beyond the road.

Running also did not erase the comparison. For a long time, I would scan the results and measure myself against age categories, familiar names, and previous performances. The habit of comparison is deeply embedded in most of us. Even in middle corrals, where the stakes are modest, the mind seeks ranking. Over the years, that impulse softened, but it did not vanish entirely. Running did not purify me of ego. It exposed it and gradually reduced its volume.

It did not make me fearless either. Before races, especially longer distances, a familiar undercurrent of doubt persists. Have I trained enough? Will the body hold up? What if the pace falters early? Even after multiple finishes, the start line carries a certain humility. Experience reduces panic but does not

eliminate uncertainty. Running did not make me immune to fear. It made me better at proceeding despite it.

There is a temptation in reflective writing to romanticise transformation, to suggest that a single practice reshaped one's identity entirely. That would not be accurate in my case. I remain, in most measurable ways, an ordinary individual. I wake, work, worry, plan, and rest like countless others. Running did not carve a heroic silhouette around my life. It fitted into it.

What it gradually removed was illusion. The illusion that speed equates to superiority. The illusion that visibility equates to value. The illusion that excellence must always be spectacular. Through repeated exposure to distance, to fatigue, to recovery, I began to see that greatness, if that word must be used, often hides in repetition rather than peak performance.

But before acknowledging what running made possible, it is important to be clear about what it did not do. It did not elevate me above the crowd. It placed me within it. It did not guarantee applause. It guaranteed opportunity — the opportunity to show up again. It did not promise permanent strength. It required ongoing negotiation with the body.

Perhaps most importantly, running did not change my fundamental ordinariness. It did not convert me into an exceptional athlete, nor did it alter my statistical placement within the field. I remained in later corrals. I remained in the middle percentiles. I remained someone who trained earnestly and finished reliably.

And somewhere along the way, I stopped wishing that it had made me more than that. There is relief in accepting that a pursuit does not need to transform you into something extraordinary to be meaningful. The road does not demand reinvention. It demands presence. It does not require you to

outrun the field. It requires you to move forward at the pace you can sustain.

Running did not make me different from others in dramatic ways. It made me more honest with myself. It clarified the scale on which I operate. It reminded me that being ordinary is not a defect to correct, but a condition to inhabit fully. In a world eager for spectacle, that clarity feels steady.

And steadiness, I have come to believe, is underrated.

If running did not transform me into someone exceptional, it did something subtler and perhaps more durable. It made certain qualities possible. Not dramatic qualities that alter how the world sees you, but interior ones that alter how you see yourself.

The most obvious of these is discipline. Not the loud, motivational version of discipline that thrives on slogans, but the quiet, repetitive version that asks very little and demands consistency. For years now, lacing up has not required inspiration. It has required a decision. Some mornings are easier than others. Some evenings are more negotiable than others. But the habit, built slowly over seasons of training and interruption, carries its own momentum. I do not wake each day debating whether I am capable. I wake knowing that I will try.

That knowing has extended beyond running. Discipline acquired on the road rarely announces itself elsewhere, yet it seeps into ordinary routines. When you have negotiated fatigue at kilometre thirty-five, you are less intimidated by a long week at work. When you have rebuilt after injury, you understand that progress can be incremental yet meaningful. The patience learned in training cycles, weeks of base mileage before visible improvement, teaches you that growth often precedes recognition.

Running made patience possible. It also made humility easier to accept. On the road, you are reminded repeatedly that there is always someone faster and someone slower. That hierarchy shifts with terrain, weather, age, and experience. Your place in it is rarely fixed at the top. Over time, this variability softens the ego. You learn to measure progress against your own previous effort rather than against the front of the pack. You learn that the race is not a referendum on your worth. That realisation carries weight outside sport.

Running made perspective possible. There were phases in my professional life when outcomes did not align perfectly with effort. There were ceilings. There were selections and non-selections. There were moments of quiet disappointment. Running did not remove those realities, but it provided proportion. A difficult week felt manageable after a long run. A professional setback did not define identity any more than a slow race defined athletic capability. The body, having endured discomfort voluntarily, reminded the mind that temporary struggle is not permanent identity.

Running also made recovery visible. Injuries, particularly the more serious ones, are not merely physical interruptions. They are confrontations with limitations. The right shoulder that broke, the enforced weeks of convalescence, the slow physiotherapy sessions - all of these moments exposed vulnerability. Yet they also revealed resilience. The body, given time and attention, responds — the mind, when patient, recalibrates. To run again after a fall is not dramatic heroism. It is quite gratifying.

Gratitude has perhaps been the most unexpected gift. In the early years, I ran with ambition. Later, I ran with discipline. Now, more often than not, I run with gratitude. Grateful that the knees cooperate. Grateful that the heart rate has settled. Gratitude that breath, though heavier than it once was, still finds rhythm. At an

age when many begin negotiating chronic discomfort, the ability to cover distance remains a privilege. That privilege does not announce itself loudly. It whispers each time the first few strides feel comfortable.

Running made awareness possible. There is a specific calm that emerges during steady kilometres. Not dramatic clarity, but a subtle ordering of thought. Problems shrink to scale. Conversations replay without sharp edges. Plans form without urgency. The road, repetitive and predictable, becomes a backdrop against which the mind unwinds. I have often returned from runs not with solutions, but with softened reactions. And softened reactions are often more valuable than quick answers.

It also made continuity possible.

Over the years, postings changed, cities shifted, and professional roles evolved. Yet wherever I arrived, there was always a stretch of road available. Sometimes it was along the sea, sometimes within cantonment boundaries, sometimes through quiet neighbourhoods at dawn. Running did not depend on elaborate infrastructure. A pair of shoes, a modest stretch of space, and willingness were sufficient. That portability anchored me. In unfamiliar environments, running restored a sense of familiarity.

Running made belonging possible. In later corrals and middle percentiles, I found people who resembled me in aspiration if not in background. Conversations before races, shared complaints about humidity, mutual encouragement in the final kilometres, these were small connections, but real ones. Running clubs, informal groups, and occasional nods to fellow early-morning regulars all contributed to a sense that participation need not be solitary, even when the effort is individual.

It made ageing less intimidating. The numbers on the watch may have softened over time, but the act itself persists. There is reassurance in knowing that pace can adjust without dignity being compromised. The body will change. Recovery will lengthen. Walking breaks may increase. But movement remains possible. That possibility reframes ageing not as an abrupt decline, but as a gradual adaptation.

Perhaps most importantly, running made acceptance possible. Acceptance of limits without surrender. Acceptance of ordinariness without apology. Acceptance of the fact that improvement is not infinite and that a plateau is not failure. The road does not negotiate with fantasy. It responds to effort, not to wishful thinking. That honesty is bracing at first and comforting later.

When I consider what running made possible, none of these qualities appears spectacular in isolation. Discipline, patience, humility, perspective, gratitude, awareness, continuity, belonging, acceptance, these are not the traits typically associated with headlines. Yet they form a foundation that feels sturdy. The transformation, if it must be called that, was not upward. It was inward.

Running did not elevate me above the crowd. It embedded me within it more consciously. It did not alter my statistical ordinariness. It altered my relationship with it. The early desire to be exceptional softened into a steadier desire to remain consistent. And perhaps that is where the quiet emotional weight of this journey resides, not in medals alone, not in distances covered, but in the subtle reshaping of how effort is valued.

The road did not give me grandeur. It gave me grounding. And, over time, grounding begins to feel like enough.

If running shaped anything in me, it did so while life continued in its usual, unceremonious way. Careers do not pause

because you have a long run scheduled for Sunday. Children do not slow their growth because they need recovery time. The ordinary life carries its own forward motion. Running did not interrupt that motion. It moved alongside it.

Professionally, my journey has followed the arc that many careers do: periods of acceleration, periods of plateau, assignments that felt validating and others that felt routine. Some superiors encouraged the discipline of sport, while others viewed it as an unnecessary indulgence. There were milestones reached and ceilings encountered. None of it was dramatic enough to define me entirely, yet each phase left its mark. Through it all, the rhythm of training remained a steady undertone.

Something is grounding about knowing that, regardless of what unfolds in the office or onboard a ship, the next morning offers a familiar stretch of road. That road does not care about rank, designation, appraisal, or internal politics. It asks only whether you are willing to move forward. In a profession structured around evaluation and hierarchy, that neutrality feels restorative.

There were times when work expanded to fill every available hour. Courses that demanded academic rigour. Postings that required long days and longer nights. Maintenance cycles that absorbed weekends. During those seasons, running shrank to maintenance mode. The distances shortened. The pace softened. Sometimes it was reduced to whatever I could manage between obligations. But even in diminished form, it remained.

Other seasons were more forgiving. Calendars opened slightly. Travel became manageable. Those were the years when races populated the schedule more frequently. A Friday evening departure, a Saturday bib collection, a Sunday morning start, and a return in time to resume routine by Monday. It was rarely

glamorous. It was mostly logistical. But the repetition of that pattern built something steady. Not obsession. Continuity.

Family life unfolded with its own demands and quiet joys. Children grew into versions of themselves that required attention beyond structured training plans. Weekends became shared territory. Long runs required negotiation, not announcement. There were mornings when staying home mattered more than chasing kilometres, and that felt right. There were other mornings when an early start allowed both commitments to coexist. Running did not compete with family life. It adjusted to it.

Injury, particularly the more serious fall that led to surgery, altered the rhythm more abruptly than any professional shift ever did. Weeks of immobility compress perspective. The arm in a sling was a visible reminder that the body negotiates endurance on its own terms. Physiotherapy sessions were less dramatic than race starts but required equal patience. Progress arrived in small increments, a few more degrees of movement, a few more minutes of unassisted motion.

During that period, I walked more than I ran. Sometimes I jogged awkwardly, one arm guarded, reminding myself that forward motion counts even when imperfect. There was restlessness, certainly, but not anger. The desire to return to running was not about reclaiming speed. It was about restoring balance.

The ordinary life is composed of these uneven chapters. There are stretches of momentum and stretches of recovery. There are years when the calendar fills with events and years when participation thins. Neither invalidates the other. Both are part of a longer arc.

Looking back, what stands out is not a highlight reel of extraordinary achievements but the pattern of return. After busy

seasons, I returned. After the injury, I returned. After professional disappointment or fatigue, I returned. Not dramatically. Simply by lacing up again. That repetition begins to define character more than any singular milestone.

I was never the fastest in my profession, nor the most decorated. I was rarely the slowest. I performed within a band that could reasonably be called steady. The same could be said of my running. Middle corrals. Middle percentiles. Reliable finishes. Occasional personal bests. Occasional slower days. Nothing headline-worthy. Nothing catastrophic.

For a long time, I might have mistaken that pattern for mediocrity. Now I recognise it as consistency. Consistency does not glitter. It endures.

Ordinary life asks for endurance more often than brilliance. It asks for showing up at work when enthusiasm is moderate. It asks for presence at home when energy is not abundant. It asks for commitment to health when convenience suggests otherwise. Running mirrored that demand. It required steady input rather than sporadic bursts of inspiration.

And so, the two, life and running, began to resemble each other more clearly. There is dignity in maintenance. In holding form. In sustaining rather than escalating. The world often celebrates ascent. It rarely applauds continuity. Yet continuity is what sustains families, organisations, and health. It is what allows decades to accumulate without collapse. Running did not elevate me above the texture of an ordinary life. It allowed me to move within that texture with more awareness. It sharpened patience during slow phases. It softened reactions during setbacks. It introduced a quiet gratitude during smoother stretches.

When I consider the arc of these years now, what remains is not a catalogue of extraordinary triumphs. It is a record of persistence. The willingness to return after interruption. The

acceptance that ordinariness is not a verdict but a condition shared widely and lived individually. The ordinary life, when examined without embellishment, is not dull. It is layered. It contains effort, fatigue, satisfaction, frustration, compromise, and renewal. Running did not transform that landscape. It walked and ran through it with me. And in doing so, it made the ordinary feel inhabited rather than endured.

When I look back at the years behind me, what stands out most is not the distances completed or the medals collected. It is the simple act of beginning, and beginning again. There were mornings when enthusiasm was high and others when it was minimal. There were seasons of energy and seasons of fatigue. Yet the road remained available.

If you are reading this and have never run because you believe you are too slow, I understand that hesitation. The image of running often appears populated by the visibly fit, the effortlessly fast, the already accomplished. Social media rarely showcases the middle of the pack adjusting shoelaces in later corrals. It celebrates finish-line sprints and dramatic personal bests.

But most runners are not those images. Most runners begin uncertain. They wonder how far they can go. They worry about pace, about form, about how they might appear. The first few runs are rarely graceful. Breathing feels louder than expected. Muscles complain early. The mind negotiates constantly. Yet something happens when you complete even a modest distance. A quiet realisation forms: the body can endure more than it assumed.

You do not have to be fast to experience that. You do not have to look like a runner to become one. The road does not demand prior qualification. It asks only that you move at the pace you can sustain. That pace may include walking. It may include

pauses. It may fluctuate. It may feel embarrassingly slow in comparison to others. But comparison is rarely the metric that sustains you in the long term. Consistency is.

If you are already running and feel overshadowed by those who post quicker times or longer distances, I understand that, too. There will always be someone faster. There will always be someone younger. There will always be someone whose training volume appears heroic. But none of that diminishes the significance of your own effort. The watch records your pace, not your worth.

In later corrals, I have stood beside runners who looked anxious and runners who looked seasoned. I have crossed finish lines beside those celebrating first attempts and those quietly marking another completion. The emotion at that moment is rarely about rank. It is about relief, pride, and validation. The knowledge that you did not quit. That knowledge does not require elite speed. Over time, I have realised that the most meaningful aspect of running is not acceleration but return. The ability to lace up after a busy week. The willingness to resume after injury. The discipline to train without an audience. These actions are rarely dramatic, yet they accumulate into something sturdy.

The ordinary runner does not dominate headlines. He occupies the road. He participates. He shows up when the conditions are imperfect and when motivation is average. That participation carries dignity. There will be days when the body resists. There will be races that do not unfold as planned. There will be moments when cut-offs feel unfair or when distances feel longer than anticipated. None of these invalidates the decision to try. In fact, they often deepen it. The road does not guarantee smooth experiences. It guarantees experience.

If you choose to run, run at the pace that allows you to continue tomorrow. If you choose to walk part of the distance, walk without apology. If you choose to sign up for an event and finish within the cut-off by minutes rather than hours, accept that finish. The medal placed around your neck will not inquire about the percentile. It will acknowledge completion. And if you are unsure whether you belong among runners at all, consider this: most of us did not begin with certainty. We began with curiosity, or restlessness, or a simple desire to move differently. Belonging arrived gradually, often in the middle of the pack, often unnoticed. You do not need to wait until you are exceptional to participate. Participation is what shapes you.

Over the years, I have slowed. I have recalibrated. I have replaced ambition for speed with ambition for longevity. I no longer measure success in minutes shaved off a personal best. I measure it in years sustained. Injuries recovered from. Mornings are still available. If I have one hope as I move toward fifty and beyond, it is not to outrun my younger self. It is to continue moving. To maintain the ability to tie my shoes, step outside, and cover whatever distance feels honest that day. To run not in defiance of age, but in cooperation with it.

Running has never demanded that I be extraordinary. It has only required that I be willing. If you are willing, the road is patient. It will meet you where you are.

There is a particular quiet that belongs only to early morning. It is not the silence of absence, but the silence of beginning. The air feels slightly cooler. The light is undecided. The day has not yet made demands. In that narrow window, before emails, before conversations, before responsibilities gather momentum, there is a small ritual that has repeated itself in my life for years.

I sit, place the shoes in front of me, and begin to lace up. The act is unremarkable in isolation — a pull through the first

eyelet, a tightening, another cross, another pull. The fingers move with familiarity earned over time. There was a period when this gesture carried ambition, a subtle anticipation of pace targets and distance goals. Later, it carried determination, proof that I would return after injury, that I would not allow setbacks to define the arc. Now, more often than not, it carries gratitude.

Gratitude that the body still cooperates. Grateful that the knees do not protest at every bend. Gratitude that breath, though slower to settle than it once was, still finds rhythm within a few hundred metres. There is no defiance in the gesture — no desire to outrun age or rewrite statistics. There is simply appreciation for the ability to move. Habit has replaced drama.

The shoes are not just accessories anymore. They are companions. They have carried me across cities, across postings, across seasons of enthusiasm and fatigue. They have felt rain, heat, humidity, and early winter chill. They have absorbed salt and dust and the quiet accumulation of miles. When I tighten the laces now, I am not preparing for conquest. I am preparing for continuation. There is calm in that distinction.

The run ahead may be modest. It may be a few kilometres at a conversational pace. It may include short walking breaks without apology. It may be slower than the version of me who once chased personal bests. But it will be honest. Honest to the body I inhabit now. Honest to the life that surrounds it. I no longer negotiate with imaginary audiences about speed. I no longer measure self-worth in split times. The watch will record what it records. The road will unfold as it always does, indifferent and available. My task is simpler than it once felt. Show up. Move. Return.

Over the years, I have stood at countless start lines and crossed many finish lines. I have felt pride, validation, irritation, disappointment, relief, and joy. I have watched medals

accumulate quietly on hangers. I have recalibrated pace, recovered from injury, and accepted that ordinariness is not a flaw but a fact. And in accepting it, I found something steadier than ambition. The early version of me might have hoped that running would make me exceptional. The present version understands that it made me consistent. It did not elevate me above the crowd. It allowed me to remain within it with dignity. It did not grant me a spectacle. It granted me continuity.

As I approach fifty, my hope is uncomplicated. To be able to run into sixty and beyond. Not at any particular speed. Not at any particular distance. To continue the ritual. To sit in that early light, tie the laces, and step out. The ordinary runner does not require grand narratives. He requires functioning joints, steady breath, and the willingness to begin again. There is no podium awaiting this morning's run. No medal at the end of it. Only the quiet satisfaction of having moved. And perhaps that is the truest form of validation.

The door closes softly behind me. The first steps feel slightly stiff, as they often do, before rhythm settles. The world begins to wake around the edges. I fall into a pace that feels sustainable. Not impressive. Not apologetic. Simply mine. There is no audience for this run. No announcement. No documentation necessary. Just the road, the breath, and the accumulated years that have led to this ordinary morning. I move forward at the pace that is mine. And that is enough.