



THE DAYBREAK DOZEN

Lucas Marshall

Dedicated to those who ran or wandered the streets of Grand Island, Nebraska.

OUR DAY BEGINS before the sun starts to rise. The air still black. We meet early. Darkness is the overwhelming element and solitude is abundant. Zack is waiting in the parking lot by the weight room, if you slap the walls of the building, it sounds like racquetball. I kill my lights and pull beside him. We nod, then closing our eyes, we pretend that we are still in bed. No luck, Dave and John arrive too soon, our sleep is aborted. Pulling up on opposite sides of us, we exit our cars, green, red, white and blue.

The air crisp with a bite of fall within it. Crossing the street, walking west, we pass the football fields and the big oak. At the corner near the discus ring, we hit the start buttons on watches and the run commences.

Ignoring the usual first turn down Blaine, we continue straight. Past neighborhoods, where the streets marching bands practice. Hot rods sit in driveways,

only half finished, garbage cans wait curbside. We pass an elementary school, where I once was almost run over by a soccer mom, she cussed us out in front of her children. Model parenting. Laughter was abundant now and then. The road curves between stucco apartments, and the white multistory with the pool where I swam when younger. We pass the bank and turn left, parallel the malls. Parking lots empty except for trash and the lap running security truck, like a dog in a small yard. He is getting paid for it.

Since the streets are empty, we own them. Running down the medians, flanked by empty, cracked, painted concrete. Fast foods, banks and housing blur by. Dan lives down the street across from the theatre, he loves comic books. Running south, now with the malls behind us, the last cornfields in town to our right. They are now replaced by department stores.



A WOODEN oilrig that held my fascination as a child sits in the yard to our left, still churning imaginations. The back of Merchen's house visible. Our friend. His mom has cancer. Years later, the church we just passed to our right, was the location of her funeral, then later his fathers too soon after that.

Past the gas station by the only hill in town, across Highway 34, the light still blinking yellow. Farm equipment store, veterinarian and lumberyard.

We cross railroad tracks and pass car dealerships, sand volleyball and grain silos. Turning left, we lack superstition and run through the cemetery, later a walking trail will be put in. Pioneers we are. Gated communities, storage bins and real estate agencies. Another set of tracks. We cruise an intersection. Dave lives up the street; Nikki the dog stands in the front yard. The neighbor's sprinklers are on. The drainage ditch to our left held many football games, our own miniature coliseum.

The city park to the right: Full of trees, a line of horseshoe pits, soccer fields, basketball tarmacs and clay tennis courts, a decrepit zoo, wild gardens, the wading pool and captive deer. An old school house still stands there. The road through the park, full of curves, slowed by speed bumps. Past a police officer's house and street construction, another elementary school, a green house, we bowled pumpkins down that street.

The sky now pink, full of back lit clouds, their edges glowing. We pass our junior high, reminiscent thoughts fill our conversation. Trailer park to the left.

THE SUN'S ambiance signal a change in direction from the east. We turn north, passing the building that never has a successful business and is always changing. More car dealerships, stores and restaurants border our run. We pass the water park, jumping the median near Arby's. Zack and I were lifeguards together, Dave sells shoes, John cuts grass. In passing, a man exclaims his release from jail. We woot, then pick up our tempo.

The road splits, we go right, skimming the edge of the down town area. Its streets still empty. Down and up the stairs of the underpass, avoiding the tracks above.

Three more blocks, we turn right, running into the 'hood.

We exit the road, changing to softer ground. A service road of the railroad is our path now. Dodging old tires, broken glass, discarded trash, we enjoy the change of scenery and terrain. The tracks take us out of town, over the highway and into the country. Corn and soybeans channel we four forward. Over the tassels we spy the airport, the beacon light spins.

Left turn, leaving the tracks to gravel roads, half mile, left turn. Gravel passes feedlots and barking dogs. Farmers nod a 'morning to us.

TURNING RIGHT, running west again, pavement returns, our steps follow the white line on the highway. Running in rhythm, under the bridge, past Steamatic. The leader turns back, the road is clear. Crossing the street as one, cutting into the VA hospital lawn. The grass is still wet, our strides kick water on our calves. Tempo workouts from the past haunt us.

Accelerating, crossing the street, more rows of houses. Squares of glass and black oil cover an intersection, we avoid it.

Turning left by the theatre, back on the sidewalks of high school campus. We near the corner. Dave remarks "Post it." Bringing our run to a close, each of us slapping the bottom of the pedestrian sign. Clocks stop. The signal to WALK clear as the morning sky. We saunter back to the cars, chat, rehydrate, stretch. 12 miles done.

We reward ourselves with pancakes and a nap. The day begins.

Lucas, Dave, Zack, and Jon ran thousands of miles together during their high school 'careers.' and just as many apart from one another. The ones spent sharing pavement, stories, agony and victory are the one's that always stand out in the author's mind. "Post it" fellas.