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I Have Strange Dreams, and Mountains Are in Them

The morning dawns clear and calm, but here in Silverton, Colorado, at 9,300 feet elevation, the temperature has dipped into the forties. The alarm goes off at 6:45, and we struggle out from under covers and stand at the window looking south at the mountains enclosing this small valley in the San Juan Mountains. Peering up, I can see the summit of Kendall Mountain, elevation 13,060 feet, where I hope to be standing in just a couple of hours. My stomach pitches at the sight. The room is chilly and I am nervous, so I begin to dress, trying to select the right combination of clothes for what I have come to call “the ordeal.” T-shirt, turtleneck, shorts, socks for feet, socks for hands, and a pair of durable running shoes. I do a few push-ups and sit-ups to awaken my muscles, hit the bathroom, and we’re off for Greene Street and the starting line.

The ordeal is the Kendall Mountain Run, an annual event in which, for no apparent reason, seemingly normal people run six miles and 3,700 vertical feet up a rocky jeep road out of town, scramble madly to the summit of the mountain, and then descend

by the same route. The entire course is approximately thirteen miles long. Compared to other notorious Colorado mountain races like Imogene Pass and Pikes Peak, then, Kendall is shorter and, on average, steeper. Note that it is a “run,” not a “race.” The organizers deliberately downplay the competitive aspect of the event. Some good runners come to Silverton for Kendall, but by and large it is a local crowd, once a year struggling to the top of the neighborhood mountain.

As we go to the starting line, I chatter away, trying to vent nervous energy and in this way assuage my doubts about this venture.

“Tell me again whose idea this was?”

“Yours, dear.”

“Well, it was a bad one.”

And, “If my mother were here, she wouldn’t want me to do this.”

And finally, “I realize now I don’t have to do this. I don’t have to pit myself against that mountain. I don’t have anything to prove to anybody.”

But of course I do.

She just smiles.

Greene Street is alive with runners warming up. We walk quickly to the ice cream parlor to register, then sit on a bench on the sidewalk in the sun while I pin my number to my shirt. Kendall is one run still small and informal enough that preregistration isn’t necessary. I stand and stretch for a few minutes, deciding that if I’m going to run thirteen miles up and down a mountain I certainly don’t need to jog to warm up. In the next block people are already massing for the start. I sigh and go to join them. I am struck by the

number of women in the field. Perhaps a quarter of the 125 starters are female. I thought them smarter.

Bill Corwin, a lawyer in town, organizes the race, starts it, and runs in it. He is describing, with obvious relish, the dangers of the run: the dearth of oxygen at this altitude, the snow fields and steep scree slope near the summit, the possibility of dangerous late-morning thunderstorms. (In the event of thunderstorms, he tells us, we can go to the summit if we want. “But I’m not,” he adds ominously.)

I ask the fellow next to me about the course. “Are there any flat stretches?”

“The third mile isn’t too bad,” he says agreeably. I embrace this fact and immediately distort it. The third mile suddenly becomes a smooth, gradual downhill, a mile in which I am magically refreshed halfway up the mountain.

“But once you pass an old boxcar,” he continues, “the shit really hits the fan.”

Corwin asks us to settle down and with little fanfare fires the gun. We glide slowly off the mark in an amorphous blob, nobody doing better than six and a half minutes per mile, even on this flat first half-mile. We turn right and cross a wooden bridge over the Animas River, splash across a couple of cold overflow creeks (this water was snow only hours ago), and abruptly begin the ascent. I am in about twentieth place and holding my position, doing what I take to be about nine-minute miles.

Two hours is considered a good time for the run. The course record is 1:43, set in 1981 by Ned Overend, a triathlete from nearby Durango. I hope to average ten minutes per mile going up and come down in forty-five or fifty minutes for a final time of 1:50-1:55, but I’ll be happy with anything under two. Miles are not marked, however, so

we're on our own to gauge pace.

We climb steadily, wrapping around the western shoulder of the mountain, struggling now under shadow of aspen and Douglas fir. Snowmelt flows in a little stream that meanders from one side of the jeep road to the other, and our feet get wet.

About two miles into the course I realize I'm not going to be able to run the whole way, even at ten-minute pace, and I begin to worry. The road eases slightly and I slow and shake my arms at my side, vainly trying to loosen them. The road begins to switch back and forth, the curves steep, the straight stretches less so. The boxcar appears where it should, at about the three-mile mark, but the third mile hasn't been particularly easy. By this time I've resigned myself to walking, although I am embarrassed to do so. I glance behind me to see who will witness the vile deed. The six people running in strained slow motion between me and the last switchback don't seem interested in what I'm doing and suddenly, without my even deciding to do it, both of my feet are on the ground at the same time. I am the first kid on my block to walk. I continue to worry about this until the road curves left and I'm looking up a steep hill on which everybody in sight is walking. I walk a hundred paces, jog a hundred, walk a hundred, in disbelief gaining on the people in front of me, until even this alternation becomes too difficult. I try walking two hundred and jogging a hundred, and finally am reduced to jogging the shorter, more gradual inclines and walking the longer, steeper ones.

At what I estimate to be the five-mile mark, my watch reads 54:00. Although the air is still cool, we are now above timberline in the sun on the south side of the mountain and I am sweating profusely. I strip off my turtleneck and tie it around my waist and stuff

my glove-socks into the front of my shorts. A hundred yards before I leave the jeep road for the final ascent, the two leaders pass me on their way down. I mumble encouragement.

The last half-mile, in which we gain about 400 vertical feet, is a free-for-all scramble up a steep scree slope and across slushy snowfields to the summit, where three women sit recording our race numbers. They are wearing down parkas. I wheeze, stare vacantly around at a panorama that should inspire and exalt me, and merely touch the stake as they instruct me to do. They laugh at my deliberate movements.

“The view is worth it, right?” one of them asks.

I look at her and laugh. “No.”

Distracted thus, my brain only marginally functional, I neglect to check my watch.

Then: down, down, down. People barely maintaining control on the scree, skidding and slipping on the snow, dodging people coming up, turning ankles, almost—but miraculously not—falling. “These people are crazy,” I think, and so we are.

On the jeep road again and people screaming past me wildly at sub five-minute-mile pace. Down, down, down. Braking for the curves, splashing in the water, tunneling into the trees. Near the boxcar I finally establish a steady pace, with steady footsteps right behind me. With about a mile and a half to go he pulls up beside me, and we nod to each other. “My name is Joe,” he says, offering his hand. Without thinking, I shake it and introduce myself. How strange, it occurs to me a minute later, that even here we observe the formality of shaking hands.

We chat with each other. I am going as fast as I can safely go, but the descent saves wind so we can converse freely. Coming down the final hill, we agree to stride in together, but on level ground—the last quarter-mile—my legs quiver with fatigue and threaten to buckle. I tell Joe to go ahead and slow to a jog. Even so, I pass two who passed me earlier, now walking in.

I finish in 1:58 and am delighted. The ordeal is over, and although my body will suffer its effects for a week, I can now savor the accomplishment. Free beer, a lively crowd, a T-shirt (“one of the most prestigious in the Four Corners area,” according to Corwin), a thundershower that materializes out of nowhere, and Kendall Mountain is over for another year. We’re ready to go home, to the south, to Indian Country.

“Tell me again why I wanted to do this?”

She just smiles.

I suspect we’ll be back.

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