

## Chapter Two.

“Huh...? Is it morning already...? It’s still dark!...”  
came a voice from inside a nearby sleeping bag.

“No son...not yet...go back to sleep” PJ said as he slipped through the screen door out into the cool morning air.

PJ sat down on the front porch and put on his Asics running shoes. He had been loyal to this particular brand of shoe ever since his high school days in the early 80’s. Back then, the company was known as Tiger and their shoes were hard to find. The running boom that started in the late seventies put the company on the map. Prior to the boom, PJ used to purchase his Tiger Montreal’s from a guy that ran a shoe distributorship out of an old garage located behind a funeral home in Massachusetts.

PJ’s pre-run stretching routine was something else to which he was loyal. Toe touches, followed by achilles stretches, followed by thigh stretches, and groin stretches. He did them slowly and held them while he counted to 15. And while he stretched, he would think. Think about almost anything, his family, friends, job, his latest bowel movement... just about anything. Today it would be Parker Engineering.

Parker Engineering was an outfit that designed and built chemical plants. They would hire project engineers like PJ in large numbers and released them in like manner when the work load dropped. Normally, PJ would not even consider interviewing with an engineering firm, but it had been nearly to a year since the layoff, and he was beginning to dip into his post severance package savings. Parker Engineering was a local firm with good community ties. They would hold a 15K race every September.

Many runners planning to run the New York Marathon would run Parker's race as a final tune up for the marathon. Parker also designed and built the football stadium for the local public school known as Abraham Clark. The stadium was called Elliot Field, in memory of Elliot Parker, who founded the company in 1948. Elliot had played football for Abraham Clark for 3 years and coached the squad for an additional 23 years. He was a self-made millionaire and contributed millions to the school and town during his lifetime. Elliot died of a stroke in 1988. The company was now owned and operated by his son, Victor, who shared much of his father's devotion to the community. But Victor was a recluse ever since his daughter committed suicide in 1984. Sadly, she was despondent over the tragic death of her first love. She was only 17 at the time.

"Thirteen, ...Fourteen,...Fifteen." PJ thought as he did one final groin stretch. PJ slid his hands across his calf muscle and felt it twitch as he "played" with the stretch. It brought back the memory of the time his mother tried to teach him how to wrestle. PJ had been bullied by one of the neighborhood kids, Ralph Barracks, and Rose, PJ's mother, took it upon herself to teach him to defend himself. She came from Irish stock and knew how to handle herself. PJ recalled trying to get away from one of her wrestling moves and as he grabbed her leg he realized how muscular she was. As much as he tried, her speed and strength was just too much, for the 10 year old PJ. Regardless, her lessons were the base of PJ's strength through his life. PJ smiled and gave the stretch one final pull and then jumped to his feet to start his run.

PJ descended from the porch and jogged towards the camp exit. Prior to leaving, however, he stopped in front of the main lodge to review a map of the running loops

laid out by the coaching staff. One loop, the 7 mile loop, exited the camp in an eastward direction and traveled ½ mile up a steep hill and then wound along a beautiful dirt and paved mountain road known as Cliffside Road. He thought this would be a nice run since the sun would rise in about 20 minutes and he had overheard the night before that the views from Cliffside Road were supposed to be stunning.

The second option for running this morning was the easier downhill loop into town. It would be much more forgiving on his legs at this early hour.

Following a quick sip of water from the water fountain, PJ was on his way. As he approached, the exit of the campground, PJ was still wrestling with which way to go. His legs were tight and the cool, fog of the morning made the loosening up process a little more difficult. Would it be left for the steep uphill, or right for the easy run into down. PJ thought to himself, “which way would mom go”?

### Chapter 3

PJ took off to the left and headed uphill towards Cliffside Road. “Never waste a hill” he thought to himself as he battled the ascent, and tried to wake up his sleep legs.

Normally, PJ worked out twice a day, 6 days per week. He had increased the intensity of his training routine 6 months earlier after reading about Umar Sayed, a rival from his high school running days, who was tearing up the New Jersey road racing circuit. Umar and PJ ran 1-2 in the NJ Meet of Champions at Holmdel Park in NJ in 1978. Umar edged PJ over the last 20 yards of the 5-K

race to win in 15:53. PJ had run 15:40 unchallenged on the same course a week earlier at the group meet. A local reporter, Grant Edwins, who has been covering the sport for the last 40 years, reported after the championship meet that “Sayed had risen to the occasion” and that the finish “proved too intense for Irwin”. PJ was crushed by the article and went out and ran 15:35 during a practice run on the same course four days later. This was PJ.

PJ had this fantasy that he would train “incognito” until he was ready to race again, and then face Sayed on the roadrace circuit. He had improved his training program during the first part of the year and had won two races during the last two months. Well, not exactly won, but would have won, had he entered. In June, he jumped into the city of Elizabeth 10 K run and ran unofficially without entering. During the last mile of the race he unleashed a final kick that put him 30-40 seconds ahead of the second runner. At the final cross street during the race, PJ made an abrupt turn and ran in the opposite direction. As he passed the runner-up, Rufino Mendosa, he congratulated him on a nice race and headed off towards Warinanco Park. He had done what he set out to do... test the waters. Mendosa eventually won the race and during a post race interview referred to the “Elizabeth Phantom” that had led most of the race and then turned around and ran off into oblivion.” PJ framed the article and hung it in the basement next to his weight lifting set.

A few minutes after he passed through the totem poles that bordered the camp entrance, PJ had completed the initial hill climb and was into a rhythmic pace with each stride lengthening as he loosened up a bit on a nice flat section of road. A dog barked in the distance as PJ passed a mailbox with the name Zimmer on it. The house could barely be seen through the thick fog that enveloped the area.

“I hope it’s not a god damned Chihuahua on the loose” thought PJ. When he was twelve, a chihuahua put him in the hospital when it bit him in the achilles. “Ugly damn rodent dogs!” he scoffed.

PJ picked up the pace a bit until he was convinced he was not followed. Approximately three quarters of a mile into the run, the road veered off to the left and began to rise sharply in another uphill grade. This portion of road was heavily shrouded in fog. PJ did his best to stay on the road by looking straight down for signs of tire tracks in the dirt road. He shortened his stride and leaned into the hill as he tried to maintain pace. The terrain to the right side of him began to drop off as he continued to ascend the hill which seemed to spiral in a never-ending curve to the left. His legs were beginning to burn and he started to use his arms more to gain momentum as he fought the hill.

With sunrise still 10 minutes away and a heavy fog covering the area, PJ made his way to what appeared to be the centerline of the road as it straightened out for a brief spell. Off to the right was a sharp drop off with a view that was still hidden by the lack of daylight...and heavy fog. As a result, PJ was unaware of the beautiful view he was missing. But Cliffside Road was four miles long, and there would be plenty of view left after sunrise.

Just then, the road began to spiral to the left. This time, in a slight downhill, not much, but enough to rest the legs and provide the setting for a brief burst of speed.

“I’ll cut a tangent and run as close as possible to the corner that is jutting out of this mountain” PJ strategized. “Then I’ll carry the pace for another 400 yards and ease off”.

Suddenly, without any warning, PJ felt a sudden pain across his forehead, chin, chest, and thigh. “Oh shit”, he thought as he crashed to the ground, “What the hell was

that?” PJ peered behind him as he staggered to his feet in the middle of the road.

His head reeled with pain as he tried to focus on the surroundings. At first, he could not see the obstacle that he had run into. But then, through the fog, he made out a metal utility pole support cable. “What friggin’ hick puts a cable like that so close to the road!” he lamented as he realized what he had run into. “Who the hell would put...” he felt the sting of blood dripping into his eye and began to remove his shirt to wrap it around his head. His head ached severely and he started to think he may have to turn around and go back to the camp.

As he pulled his shirt over his head he noticed a flash of light from around the corner of the mountain. At first, he thought he was beginning to pass out; but then, through the fog and darkness, he watched as the light divided into two round orbs. At the same time, he noticed the sound of a diesel engine that was growing louder. ‘What the hell’, PJ thought to himself as he looked towards the orbs.

Suddenly, the source of the light became clear to him, and there was a vehicle heading through the fog straight towards him. As he rushed towards the right side of the road the noise of the engine grew louder and the fog enveloped mass began to take shape. It was a truck of some sort...no...a school bus! A school bus full of children bearing down on him! For some reason, through all the fog, PJ was able to make out the horrified look on the bus driver’s face as he tried to avoid the runner.

PJ ran to the right side of the road to avoid the bus. This side of the was covered in fog that disguised the sharp drop off that was only a couple feet beyond the edge of the road. The bus driver slammed on the breaks which caused the bus to veer in the same direction.

As PJ left the roadway he felt the ground give way beneath his feet. In a flash, he was airborne, and then tumbling down the side of the mountain. Despite the chaos of the fall, PJ was able to recognize the load noise that the bus made as it made its first impact with the side of the mountain and began to cartwheel down the slope, following closely behind PJ.

Despite the fog, there was enough light in this area for PJ to see the rear door of the bus fly open as it careened down the hill. He saw one of the bus occupant ejected through the bus as it bounced completely over the top of PJ and came to rest about 20 yards below him.

PJ clung to the root of an evergreen and listened as he heard the moan of fire erupting under bus. PJ tried to get up to check on the bus occupants but his own pain was too intense. A few seconds later, there was a tremendous explosion. The fuel surrounding the bus had ignited the fuel tank, and now, what was left of the bus was engulfed in flames. There were a few screams, followed by an eerie silence. PJ grimaced and sobbed as he gave way to the feeling of helplessness that had overtaken him. He could not move...he could not help these kids. His head dropped wearily to his left. In doing so, he caught view of another set of eyes staring directly into his. "These eyes were lifeless", he thought. The eyes were those of a young boy. "Can't be more than sixteen" he thought. The boy wore an old worn out grey and green sweatsuit.

Just then, the boys eyes focused on PJ. He coughed, and then muttered something that PJ did not quite hear.

"Whaaat?" PJ groaned.

Once again, the boy peered into PJ's eyes. This time an eerie feeling overcame PJ. PJ listened hard to the words the boy uttered.

"We have to win the ...Easterns this...year." the boy gurgled in a low, barely audible voice.

“Win the Easterns?” PJ thought to himself. “Damn... this bus must be the group of high school runners that did not make it to camp last night.” he thought. Only bonafide runners would know what the “Easterns” were. The term referred to the East Coast Championship Cross Country Meet held every year at Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, New York, or at Warinanco Park, in Rozelle, NJ.

PJ looked at the boy and noticed blood flowing from where his left ear used to be. The boy reached out his hand and touched PJ’s face. The boy’s head slumped, and very soon after, his hand grew cold. The only sign of life from the twisted wreckage had now given way to his injuries. Only PJ remained.

PJ closed his eyes and drifted off.

