

Running from herself

Her workouts began as a punishment. Then she discovered the *real* reason she needed to pound the pavement. By Anna Marrian

Go ahead and sprint. But do it for healthy reasons.

I was a woman obsessed with ass. My own and other people's. I was mesmerized by shape, size and texture; by the latitude and longitude; by the possibility of perfection. To manage my fixation, I ran no matter what, in strange cities and on unknown country roads. I ran in intolerable heat and torrential downpours. I ran when I was injured, exhausted or hungover.

The truth is, I hated to run. I did it out of vanity and fear, and I did it rigidly: 20 minutes exactly, seven days a week. My purpose was to defeat the cellulite invasion marching down my rear and thighs, to quiet the anxiety in my brain. I'd force myself into my running gear, imagining the taut buns in my future, then hit the road hermetically sealed in my headphones, legs heavy, spirit limp, compulsively counting down the songs until I could quit. Along the way, I inspected the topography of other women's backsides, rating mine as thinner or lumpier, my ranking leaving me feeling alternately smug or worthless.

I'd been at war with my body ever since I tried on bikinis as an awkward teenager under the fluorescent lights in the Macy's dressing room. My skin looked ripply in the three-way mirror, and I was certain my flaws made me less lovable. I longed not only for catcalls from construction workers and jealous glances from the chubby girls at the country club, but for the approval of my father, someone I'd seen only two dozen times in my life.

I was 3 years old when my parents split. My strict British mother and I moved from London to New York, and my free-wheeling father returned to Kenya, where he'd raised a family before he met my mother. I'd daydream about him sweeping me away to Africa, but it wasn't until I was 16 that I visited him there on my own. I was nervous to be with this man I barely knew, but I hoped we'd finally grow close. My first night, he took me to the house of an exotic Japanese woman who caressed my father's arm while I wrestled with my chopsticks and rising resentment. She was only one of many women I met on that trip. There was the petite hippie who told my father how *maaahvelous* he was and the Harvard anthropologist Dad invited on our drive to the Samburu nature reserve. Every day, she swam 100 laps, and as

I watched her lithe form glide through various hotel pools, I wondered if she was born beautiful or whether she'd made herself that way. I began swimming, too, hoping that the habit would sculpt me into something worthy of my father's attention.

In hindsight, I realize my dad had no idea what to do with his only daughter, that having a woman between us eased his uncertainty. But at the time, I felt humiliated. These women, lean and dazzling, captured his focus effortlessly, as I could not.

It was in Kenya that my running addiction took hold. Every day, I traversed the red dirt roads, dodging roving canines and the glares of locals. I wanted to outrun my anger and contempt—for the women in my father's life, for my father and for myself—because I wasn't beautiful enough for him.

One evening, Dad asked about life back home, and I confessed that my friends and I liked to get loaded on weed and chug vodka and Tang. He laughed, then asked if I'd tried anything else, like cocaine. I pretended I had so he'd think I was sophisticated. "Would you like to try it again?" he asked, then spread a glass vial, brass straw, spoon and mirror on the bedroom bureau. He let me have a few lines, then we chased away the bitterness in our throat with Scotch, his favorite drink, and so, mine. We did it again the next night, and those sessions became our most intimate encounters. This ritual—our secret—made me feel more sure of myself, more deserving of my father's love.

Through the rest of my teens and 20s, running and drugs became my dual compulsions. Perfection was possible as long as I did my daily 20 minutes, even if I'd reward myself with a cocktail of oblivion afterward: amphetamines and Guinness, ecstasy and hash. Discipline and then release were the only way to liberate my flawed body from my loathing.

I drank and drugged to excess for 15 years, shacking up with a drug-addled man much older than I was. I took temporary secretarial jobs, but my priority was finding a combination of substances that would numb my sense of inadequacy. I'd shake off the hangovers with my 20-minute adrenaline jolt, each run leaving me feeling cleansed of the night's delirium. Eventually, the

>> wild nights at clubs became weekend-long binges. The mornings after, I'd run harder, sometimes going cold turkey for a few days to try to get my life in balance. But discipline was too hard; drugs were too easy. I stopped running and began blacking out.

I finally got clean at 30, after seeing what drugs had done to the man I loved and realizing that if I didn't change, his life would become mine. I went to college, started seeing a therapist and joined a recovery group. I also began running again. Life in sober skin felt too intense, and running gave me an endorphin escape, a brief sense of power.

I was less successful at quitting my dad. My hunger for his love was as urgent as ever. I didn't write him or visit, but I did read his occasional letters: single, typed pages chronicling his adventures with people who were as mysterious to me as he was.

When, at 82, he got sick with cancer, I flew to Kenya to see him before he died. I was terrified that I'd again be reduced to something small and helpless. When I arrived, my half-brothers told me that he'd waited for me, and I lay down next to him, in the same canopy bed where I'd once watched him prepare our cocaine. He smiled, his blue eyes fading. I told him about my job in advertising and showed him a picture of my new boyfriend, still seeking his approval.

"A handsome chap," he said. We soon ran out of conversation, and he simply stared as if seeing me for the first time. Finally, I was getting his full attention. He stroked my cheek and told me I was beautiful. I held his hand, watching him take me in. When he slept, I went running on the bristly golden grass in the country he so loved, a place I would never know.

Months later, well after my father's death, I gave up running, but only because I'd broken a toe. That's when I found yoga and started stretching my way toward the coveted yoga butt. Yet the spirituality of it also pushed its way inside me, and when my toe healed, pounding the pavement seemed like a violent exercise. I hung up my sneakers, believing it was for good.

Then several years later, a petite, fiftysomething friend confessed that she wanted to do an Iron Man triathlon by her 60th birthday. She's so type A, I thought. I'm happy with yoga. But summer was coming. I may have been exercising less compulsively, but I was still vain about my body. I wondered if training for a triathlon could rid my butt of ripples once and for all. I also thought about my father, who had been an accomplished runner at Oxford; maybe there was another way to keep him with me. Back in high school, I'd also been an athlete, on the rowing team, striving to achieve healthier goals, like an undefeated season. Eventually, exercise became something else and I lost that girl. I wanted to know her again, to know this part my father had given me, so I could truly know a piece of him.

I began training for a mini-triathlon, and soon I could run fast though not far. I no longer set myself a rigid goal of 20 minutes, yet I couldn't continue much longer than that before I'd hit a wall and have to stop dead in my tracks. I'd do the same thing in the pool, swimming too fast, then losing my breath after only

10 lengths. However far I'd come emotionally, I feared that my old, perfectionist attitudes were hardwired deep into my brain.

So I broke up with my iPod and forced myself to run alongside a friend who chatted effortlessly as we rounded the Central Park reservoir. When I made it to 40 minutes, I realized that my body was willing and able. It was my *mind* that I needed to train.

At the pool the next week, getting ready to overtake a sluggish woman in the lane up ahead, I decided to use her as a pacer instead. At first, I felt as if I were barely moving, but gradually I relaxed into a rhythmic crawl, my deliberate strokes becoming a steady meditation. I did 40 consecutive laps, then hauled myself out, my body tingling in triumph, my mind at peace.

Biking was an unexpected joy. Cycling in the tree-lined park, I'd secretly race other riders, then coast across an imaginary finish line. Except this time I was competing playfully, for the thrill of it, the wind licking my face as exciting as any high.

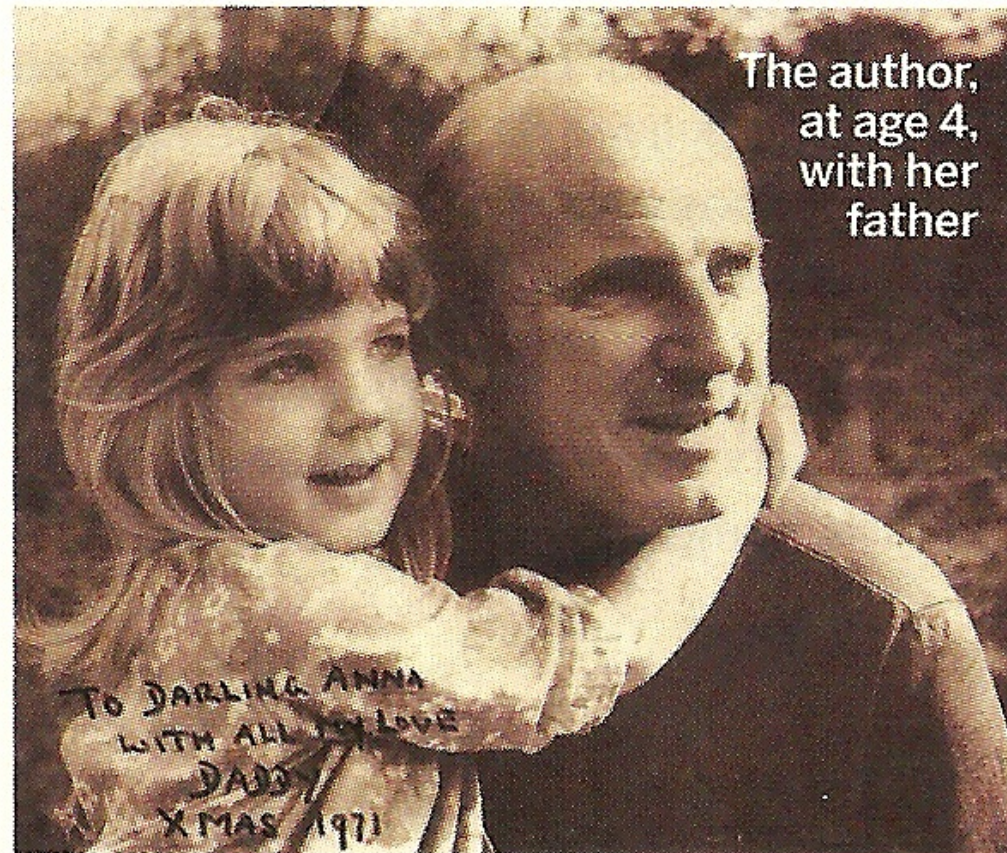
On race day, I arrived in New Jersey at 5:30 A.M. to see hundreds of women of all ages, large and small, elite athletes and

first-timers, mothers and daughters, framed by the brightening sky. As I chatted with nearby competitors in the transition area, I was struck by the easy camaraderie. I'd felt invisible around the women in my father's life, but here I felt a sense of female kinship, like I was a part of something larger.

The race began in the ocean, where swimming felt like slithering inside a can of worms, hundreds of feet kicking perilously close to my nose. Next, I jumped on my bike, sure I was last. I knew I'd burn out if I didn't pace myself, but I couldn't slow down. Then I fell in behind a blonde and a brunette and we took turns leading, acknowledging one another with fleeting smiles and nods of the head, until we settled into a moderate pace. Not once did I think to look at their behinds to see how mine compared.

By the time I got to the run, I felt I'd hit molasses and imagined lying down on the velvety green grass by the side of the road. Whatever genes I had inherited from my father were failing me, but I refused to give up on myself as I had done in the past. As I plodded beyond the halfway point, I turned myself over to my body. And when I finally crossed the finish line, my entire being heavy with fatigue, I was certain that this was the most demanding thing I had ever done, tougher than letting go of the booze and the drugs, than letting go of a father. When I looked up at my results, I discovered that I'd finished 16th out of nearly 300 competitors. Stunned, I wondered what my father would have thought of that.

At home in the shower, I soaped carefully around the blackinked race numbers marking my biceps, leaving them to fade by themselves. I spent the rest of the day recuperating and surfing the Web for next season's races, setting my sights on the New York Triathlon, which was twice the distance I'd just finished. The prospect of doing something so challenging filled me with anxiety, yet I knew that my body, the body I was at last getting to know—with its dimples and muscles side by side—was capable of more than I'd ever given it credit for. ■



“Maybe there was another way to keep Dad with me.”