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A DIFFERENT FLOW

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For months, as the lockdowns due to COVID-19 went on longer than we all expected, I ran alone. Out on the trails, the people I passed didn't nod or smile, but instead hurriedly stepped aside, turning to face away from me, or even jumping into hedges to avoid getting too close to me and my heaving breathlessness.

Without any races to train for, without even that distant, shared goal on the horizon, running began to feel more and more like a lonely, isolated pursuit.

For many, that may seem an odd complaint. Isn't running always a lonely activity? Isn't that the point, and the appeal of running, that it's time on your own; away from others? That's why running boomed in the pandemic: You don't need anyone else; you can happily do it alone.

Yet for me and many others, running has always been both an individual pursuit, a chance to get away from everything for a few hours, and also an intimately connected activity.

Running with others in a group, or even with just one other person, is to share not only time and space, but also energy and momentum. I've run in the midst of a group of Kenyans up in the Rift Valley, and the surge of energy you feel as 100 feet pound the dirt in unison, as though part of one single organism, is a wonderful and uplifting experience.

You don't have to go all the way to Kenya. I've had the same feeling racing around Paignton Green on one-mile (1.6-kilometer) repeats with my Torbay AC running group. You can feel yourself being carried along by the sense of collective momentum, like you are part of something larger than yourself.

I sometimes half daydream, as I run with my training group, that we're a bunch of marauding warriors—in our brightly colored T-shirts and shorts—rampaging around all the parked cars, everything passing

in a blur as we charge along, leaping up and down the curbs, the ground churning under our feet.

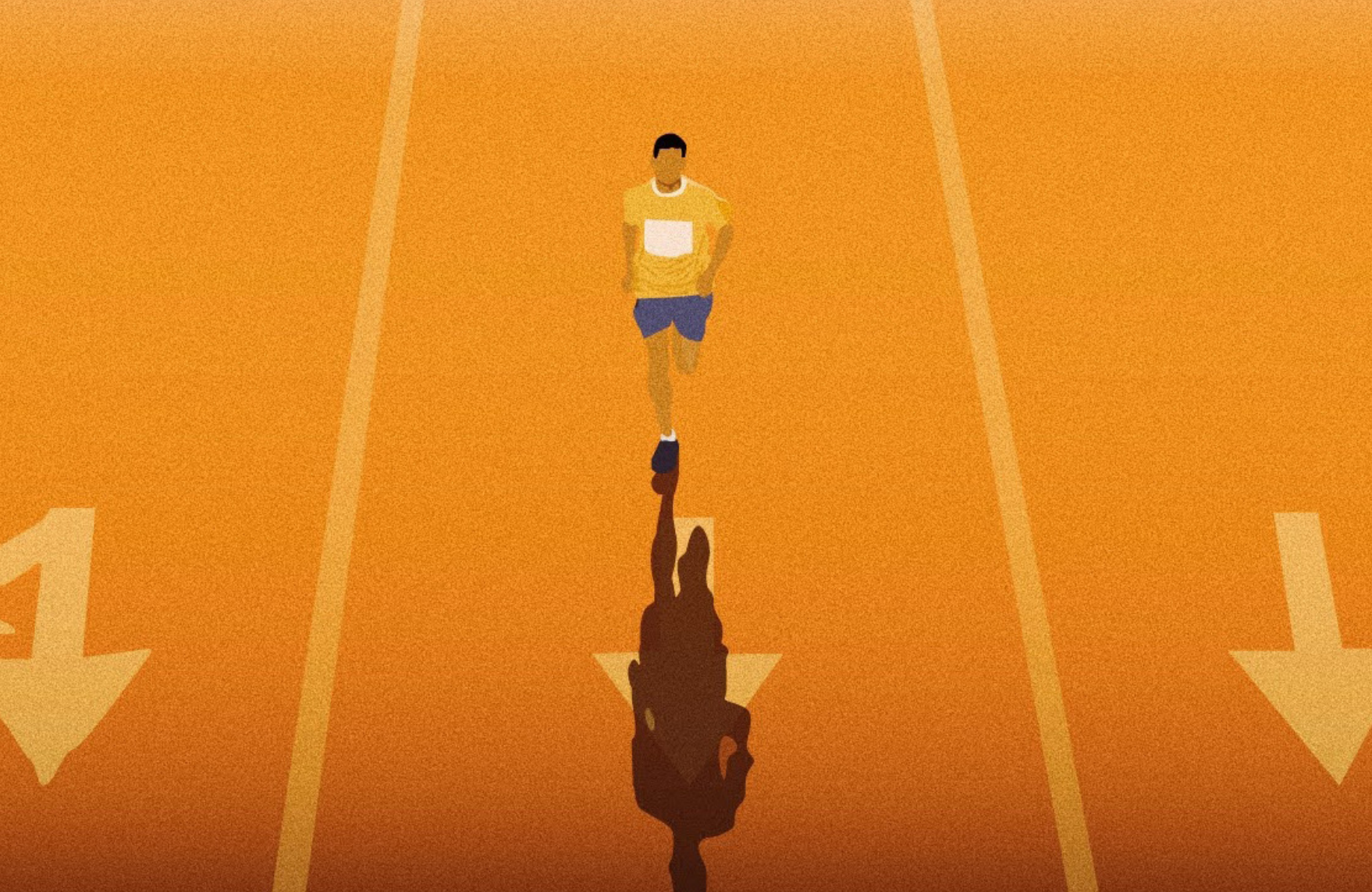
Running alone feels much more self-conscious. There is less of that sense of abandon, that sense of being swept along. Running alone in a town or city can feel more like paddling against the tide rather than being carried along with it, as you weave carefully in and out of pedestrians looking down at their phones, and watch out for cars and cyclists as you cross the roads.

In Iten in Kenya, where I lived for six months, cars would pull over to the side of the road when they saw a big group of runners coming. In Iten, the runners really do rule the roads.

In Ethiopia, too, running in a group is the most common way to train. In his excellent book on Ethiopian running, *Out of Thin Air*, author Michael Crawley explains how the athletes see energy as something collective. He writes: "Energy in Ethiopia is seen as transbodily. It can flow between people, it can be shared, and it can even, on occasion, be stolen."

Crawley describes how the runners in the groups are expected to take turns leading the training runs, which is described as "bearing someone else's burden", while to "follow someone's feet" means to feed off their energy.





Races, too, are a coming together, a communal celebration of running, and as a result they can be strangely energizing. I find I can run harder, further, and faster in a race than I could ever possibly run on my own. How does that work? It's like some switch is flicked and running becomes something different. It's no longer a slog—at least not until near the end—but is instead an adrenaline-fueled rush. The construct of the race, the existence of competitors, spectators, a finish line, a set route, all come together to change the entire energy of running. Like plugging it into a power socket.

I missed all that in lockdown, and I've been glad to get back to it again recently, reconnecting and re-energizing.

And yet, running in lockdown wasn't all bad. In the enforced absence of high-octane racing, without the buzz of running in a group, I have, over the last 18 months, begun to discover another side to running. Not just running alone, which I have always enjoyed too, but something else.

One afternoon during England's second-wave shutdown, after I had already done all my planned runs for the week, and had completed my weekly mileage target, I decided to head out for another run. It was lockdown, after all, and I had plenty of time on my hands.

I didn't have a set distance in mind, so I just ran, simply enjoying the sense of movement as I passed through the trees along the river,

ghostly strands of mist lacing the autumnal landscape. And I had a strange realization. For the first time that I could remember, I wasn't running with a goal in mind. Ever since I first started running at age nine, I've been chasing goals. When I was younger, I was training to win races, and ever since becoming an adult I've either had the goal to get faster and to beat my best times, or to run further and complete ultramarathons.

But this run wasn't part of any schedule. I had no races lined up, as they'd all been canceled. I wasn't even running to complete my arbitrary weekly mileage. I was running for the sheer fun of it.

Of course, I have always enjoyed running, and the goals are only part of the reason I run. But they are always there, focusing my mind, directing my thoughts. Yet here I was, running without any other reason than because I felt like it.

The realization was liberating. The pace didn't matter. The distance didn't matter. And I decided then and there that once the races returned, I'd remember this feeling, and that I would run—at least sometimes—as my heart dictated, ditching the watch, detaching from everyone and everything, the past and the future. Just drifting along alone on the trails for a while.

And that's the beauty of running: Connected or disconnected, together or alone, it works both ways.^^

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