

RUNNER'S

WORLD

Motivation :Runners' Stories



In My Nature

A city girl explores a trail and finds herself.

By Kristin Armstrong

If I'm going to try something new, the school-girl nerd in me likes proper instruction. I prefer to be surrounded by people more knowledgeable, intuitive, insightful, interesting, funny, or faster than me. So I couldn't delve into Trail Running 101 with just anyone.

I flew to Woodside, California (35 miles south of San Francisco), to try off-roading with Scott Dunlap, the husband of Christi, one of my childhood friends. Scott is one of the most eclectic cats I know--he's freaky smart, a Stanford MBA-type who can converse with equal fluidity about high-tech algorithms, musical compilations, or pop culture from no-man's-land. Scott fell off the workaholic treadmill after he made a fortuitous decision to back out of a meeting near the World Trade Center on 9/11. Relief brought guilt. And guilt brought depression. He quit his job and sank into a slump.

Christi did what any woman of reason would do: She bought a dog, a pug named "Rocky." And she went to work, leaving her scruffy hubby to contend with him. Pugs typically don't run, since their squished-up faces aren't conducive to air intake. But Rocky was rowdy and had to be worn out. This inspired explorations of the trail network outside Scott's front door. Chasing Rocky led to fitness. Fitness led to freedom. And freedom led to peace. Scott found a new passion--running--and some serious talent. He competed in more than 14 races last season, including three marathons, and ran a half-marathon PR of 1:14.

Scott always runs alone. The trails are his personal sanctuary. We all have our private places, so I was honored by the invitation to join him.

The month leading up to my visit, Scott tested my Girly Meter with e-mails about losing a toenail, his eternal case of poison oak, and odd places to find ticks. He once sent a postrace photo of a dude with gory red streaks down the front of his shirt with the subject line of "Nipple Chafing." To which I replied: "Nursed twins. Next?"

But my bring-it-on attitude was short-lived. Before starting our adventure, we stopped at the trailhead at Skyline Trail in Huddart Park to check for postings of mountain-lion sightings. Zikes! The only thing I check before a run in Austin is the heat index. And that's scary enough for me.

I reminded myself that I was in good hands. After all, Scott packed munchies and a fancy electrolyte drink that would surely help me outrun any lion.

We started running, and I felt my inexperience as I tried to keep up. My breathing was uneven, and I fumbled for my stride. I took in my surroundings in choppy, blurry Blair Witch visuals.

"Don't follow my footsteps," Scott said. "You have to pick a path for yourself. What works for me probably isn't best for you." He let me take the lead, and my confidence grew.

We did a three-miler into the first day and a burly 13-miler the next. I sidestepped roots and rocks instead of curbs and recycle bins. The sound of my slapping size 9s was softened by a cushion of pine needles, leaves, and soft earth. Nature's hum begot blessed silence, my mind was lulled to a state of peace.

This was a holy space, graced by a canopy of grand pine, redwood, oak, and madrone trees. Raindrops landed emphatically and beaded on my vest. I drank in the scene, so unknowingly thirsty for a departure of this kind.

Scott asked if I could feel the oxygen here. Most of my runs are in 100-percent humidity, so yes, I could definitely feel the air, all the way to my toes, pal.

I am 33 years old, but I felt like a child, young and light on my feet. Why do we forget the things we love? I used to love playing outside, engaging in imaginary games. At home I love running because the monotony and the pace unravel the knots within. Strangely, here I grew unaware that I had knots, so engrossed in the moment that my own identity was subdued. I embraced my own bit part in the scene, the whole play in general. Nothing like a big fat redwood tree, hundreds of years old, to illustrate just how transitory our problems, and our lives, really are.

The rain picked up and I walked most of a steep 1.5-mile hill. I loved the cold drizzle and my Rasta-tangle ponytail.

I began the descent daintily, self-consciously, picking my way around puddles. This led to a high-speed, deliberate sloshing into a full-blown, shoe-sucking bog screaming "YAHOOOOOOO!" unabashedly into the face of the forest.

We got back in the pickup and sat in silence for a moment until Scott said, "You weren't as much of a chick as I thought." I flipped down the visor mirror and checked my bad self out. I pointed out that my waterproof mascara and long-lasting pink lip gloss had held up remarkably well. He sighed, and we headed home.

I still have a lot to learn about trail running, but I gathered this much: Pretty view? Stop and see. Hungry? Have a snack. Thirsty? Drink. Long hill? Walk. Treacherous footing? Slow down. The lesson wasn't lost on me. This isn't just how to run, it's how to live.

Flying home, I was giddy about my new crush. Trail running and I agreed to keep in touch and pursue this thing to see where it goes. I'm celebrating the birth of a new passion, built on the faithful reverence of the old. Happy trails.