

I picked up running seriously in the fall of 2017, when I decided to run a half marathon on New Year's Eve, a flat and scenic route in the town of Delray, along South Florida's iconic A1A. I was on a six week vacation at the time, staying with my parents between jobs, and every morning I'd roll out of bed and log three to four miles along the streets of their small, harborside Rhode Island town. I remember the first time I ran five miles that September, when the heat of summer started bleeding into a Northeast fall, and when I made it back to my front door, I felt like I could do anything.

I'd always loved running. As a kid, track and field events were the only athletic activities I had any prowess in at school, and while I couldn't kick a soccer ball or dribble down a court with grace, I lived for the mile run and hundred yard dash. In high school, I ran cross country and have fond memories of piling into school suburbans in our green and orange uniforms, chastised by our coach to chew our lunch properly so we wouldn't get cramps, and stopping for In'n Out fries (animal style) on the drive home. I continued to run recreationally leading up to and during college, but during my four years in the hilly, sleety, beautiful countryside of upstate New York, running became dangerously entwined with an eating disorder, and eventually I tabled any serious pursuit. Running remained on the back burner when I began my professional career in the equestrian industry and turned my focus almost exclusively to horses. The long hours and near constant travel made it easy to forget about running, which became a once a week leg stretcher kind of event.

However, a few years after college, I fell back in love with running while training for the fated New Year's Eve half marathon. Though I started training while on vacation, when my new job started I carefully set aside time to run in the afternoons, and I loved waking up early on my day off to greet the pink, fluffy clouds cresting over palm trees and box hedges in the small Florida town in which I lived. I relished pounding down the paved bike paths and feeling wrung out and sweaty at the end of a run, and I enjoyed the challenge of speed workouts, the pumping of the blood in my veins, and the delicious muscle soreness that crept up into my hamstrings the following day. I logged a few training runs with my friend Heather, a seasoned marathoner, during which our conversations traveled over as many different subjects as our feet did miles, and our friendship grew in the beautifully non confrontational space shared between two people running side by side.

After I completed the half marathon, I just kept running. I did laps around my small town every Monday morning, and during the rest of the week I ran in the evening or in the humid afternoons, packing my shoes in my car to run a scenic six miles through the community of horse farms in which I worked. By springtime, my horseback riding job took me north to upstate New York, and I ran up and down hills, over train tracks and past antique shops and ice cream stands, old Victorian homes and local art galleries. When my friend visited, I drove her to a swimming hole and chose to drive on a road which I frequently ran on.

"Taylor, look at this cool house," I would point out time and again on the drive, "and that tree!" But try as I might, I couldn't capture the minutiae of the landscape from a fast moving car the way I could when I ran, and the beautiful details I observed on foot blurred together from the car. In October, I ran my first full marathon alongside the Hudson River, and just like that, I was in love.

Months later, I would find myself running with the Wellington Runners Club, back in Florida for the winter season of equestrian sport. Every Tuesday at 5 AM we met in the dark of the Starbucks shopping plaza and lap an efficient 7 miles. A fast, loping man named V would remark one morning that there is no better way to appreciate a landscape than to run through it. V had a long stride, and he wore a blinking red ankle cuff when we ran in the still-dark mornings. "We runners," he said to me once, "are happy people. Running, it's therapy, it's good for the soul!" He was correct on both counts. When I ran, I felt the landscape intimately: I came to know the exact spacing of the lines on the sidewalk along South Shore boulevard, grew familiar with the sulphuric smell of the sprinklers making lazy circles across kelly green grass, and witnessed the hazy fog rising up out of the canals to meet, and burn off, in the bright sun. I appreciated the smell of the bougainvilleas, the feel of the breeze cutting the humidity as I, a body in motion, cut through the thick air, and listened to the gentle sound of the ferns blowing together like wind instruments. I watched the moon and the brightest of stars fade into the black-blue of the dawn light in those early mornings, and felt the Floridian mist catch in my eyelashes in the cool hours before the hottest of days. Sweaty and coated with Vaseline, I completed my weekly miles with religious dedication, each step like a bead on a rosary, each ragged breath an incantation.

Running held me together. When the day brought me down, running brought me up, and as things became excessively stressful at work, my daily miles felt like a peaceful departure from the blur of employee management, scheduling, horse care, and professional responsibility. When things went poorly at work, I felt bitterly responsible, often feeling terribly inadequate and riddled with anxiety. But when I laced up my shoes and started running, I felt invincible, imbued with a newfound confidence. Nothing mattered when I was running; my cares slipped away as I slid blissfully through the predawn darkness. I started to make significant friendships over miles shared with other club members, forged over our mutual nuttiness (*who in their right mind gets up before 4:30 AM to run, anyway?* We'd ask ourselves), bad jokes, and training tips swapped back and forth as feet pounded the pavement. The club's resident running coach, a lean, svelte figure of a man who taught PE at one of the local middle schools, offered to help me train for a marathon in the spring, and I started following his weekly training plans as Florida's warm winter months blurred into an even warmer spring.

I was grateful for the marathon, and for the training program. That April, I left my job in the equestrian industry and moved to Burlington, Vermont, and I floundered through the transition. My first week in my new home it rained, and I ran soggy miles on brown, muddy dirt roads and slick concrete shoulders, soaked, dirty, and exhausted by the steep hills which were a marked contrast to flat, familiar Florida. I was also markedly alone on those runs, missing my companions in the sunny south.

Yet despite being colder, more sore, and lonely, my daily runs were the only thing in my life that felt the same - the one piece of my old routine that easily transferred from one stage of my life to the next. Accustomed to having a job since I was fourteen years old, I found myself suddenly unemployed, so I started treating running a bit like work, which helped fill that void immensely. I looked forward to my hours alone on the road or on the trail, where I could mull over my anxieties, appreciate Vermont's beautiful landscape, and give myself the illusion that I could run away from life's uncertainties, if only for thirteen miles or so. Often I would find myself, a couple miles in, muttering internally, *Thank God for running!*

Shortly after my move north, I got a nice job offer from a media and brand strategy startup in the equestrian industry, which offered the tantalizing promise of a salary and the ego boost of feeling desired by a prospective employer. However, the job required a move back to Florida and a reimmersion into the industry from which I'd just departed. While a major draw to move back south was the inevitable reunion with my running club friends, I was hesitant to make the move. I'd been charmed by my many miles through the Vermont countryside, and was starting to imagine myself happy in the landscape of the Northeast. The job also didn't feel right. It was too safe and too familiar. If I could run a marathon, if I could run thirteen fast, hilly miles alone in driving wind and forty degree rain, I could find my way in a new state. I decided to risk the job market and stay in Vermont. At least, for the time being, I had running.