

# Moving On

What happens when you finally catch the girl you've been chasing?



**S**HE DARED ME to run with her. We'd had too much wine by that point, still breaking the thick ice. We were both in our 20s, interns, and recent transplants to New Mexico—she from California, me from Georgia. We were roommates by necessity, a shy, athletic woman with three bikes in the backyard and lots of running shoes paired with a poetry-writing guy who liked to bake bread. I pulled out a pack of Parliaments and offered her

one. She smoked her first (and last) cigarette, so I agreed to run.

At dawn, we set out through the dry arroyos and side streets of Santa Fe. I sputtered and dripped. She glided. Her stride was confident, her running shorts revealing strong legs. We crested a hill as the sun rose over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and she turned around and smiled.

One run led to another. Before and after long days at work, I chased her down the roads and up the trails, through the graveyards and ancient plazas of the city. I developed calluses where thin skin had been, and an acceptance—if not an affinity—for early rising. I quit smoking. Got some real running shoes. Discovered that endorphins are a powerful aphrodisiac.

Four months later, I'd caught the uncatchable girl. We were a couple.

Nearly a year passed on and off the trails, and with it an almost imperceptible shift in the pursuit. For my birthday, she planned a trip to Moab, Utah, around a half-marathon, my first. She presented a rigorous training plan that I followed—for a while. But soon I decided to go my own way, on my own time. Maybe it was my atrophied ego, or my strengthened legs and lungs, but I'd grown tired of following her lead. Maybe I had something to prove. My worth as a man? Whatever it was, I wanted to chart my own course.

On race day, as the sun rose to warm us, we set off in the sharp desert air together, a familiar feeling. We stayed close for 12 miles as the course traced the cold, swift Colorado River. The final mile was downhill; I let my long legs go, finishing seconds ahead of her and breaking two hours, as I'd hoped. I turned around panting and smiling, expecting to see respect in her face. Instead I saw surprise, disappointment, hurt. It never occurred to me that we should finish hand-in-hand.

We broke up on the long drive home. There were other reasons, of course, for why we ended the relationship. But the way I had run that race—the way I had left her behind—was symbolic. Of the strides we no longer took together. Of the empty silences that stretched between us. Without quite realizing it, I'd been pulling away from her for a long time.

In the months that followed, I grew lonely and confused, and wondered if I'd made a mistake. I missed her the most in the morning. I begged her back, but I was too late. She was gone. But I still had this gift she'd given me one early morning. This desire to run. I was grateful for that. And so I ran on, alone. **EW**

**Charles Bethea** is back in Atlanta, baking less, sleeping later, and running faster.