THE RUNNING NOVELIST

Learning how to go the distance.

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Illustration by Jaime Hernandez

A long time has passed since I started running on an everyday basis. Specifically, it was the fall of 1982. I was thirty-three then.

Not long before that, I was the owner of a small jazz club in Tokyo, near Sendagaya Station. Soon after leaving college—I'd been so busy with side jobs that I was actually a few credits short of graduating and was still officially a student—I had opened a little club near the south entrance of Kokubunji Station. The club had stayed there for about three years; then, when the building it was in closed for renovations, I moved it to a new location, closer to the center of Tokyo. The new venue wasn't big—we had a grand piano and just barely enough space to squeeze in a quintet. During the day, it was a café; at night, it was a bar. We served decent food, too, and, on weekends, featured live performances. This kind of club was still quite rare in Tokyo back then, so we gained a steady clientele and the place did all right financially.

Most of my friends had predicted that the club would fail. They figured that an establishment that was run as a kind of hobby couldn't succeed, and that someone like me—I was pretty naïve and, they suspected, didn't have the slightest aptitude for business—wouldn't be able to make a go of it. Well, their predictions were totally off. To tell the truth, I didn't think that I had much aptitude for business, either. I just figured that since failure was not an option, I had to give it everything I had. My strength has always been the fact that I work hard and can handle a lot physically. I'm more of a workhorse than a racehorse. I grew up in a white-collar household, so I didn't know much about entrepreneurship, but fortunately my wife's family ran a business and her natural intuition was a great help.

The work itself was hard. I was at the club from morning till night and I left there exhausted. I had all kinds of painful experiences and plenty of disappointments. But, after a while, I began to make enough of a profit to hire other people, and I was finally able to take a breather. To get started, I'd borrowed as much money as I could from every bank that would lend to me, and by now I'd paid a lot of it back. Things were settling down. Up to that point, it had been a question of sheer survival, and I hadn't had time to think about anything else. Now I felt as though I'd reached the top of a steep staircase and emerged into an open space. I was confident that I'd be able to handle any new problems that might crop up. I took a deep breath, glanced back at the stairs I'd just climbed, then slowly gazed around me and began to contemplate the next stage of my life. I was about to turn thirty. I was reaching the age at which I

wouldn't be considered young anymore. And, pretty much out of the blue, it occurred to me to write a novel.

I can pinpoint the exact moment when it happened. It was at 1:30 P.M., April 1, 1978. I was at Jingu Stadium, alone in the outfield, watching a baseball game. Jingu Stadium was within walking distance of my apartment at the time, and I was a fairly devoted Yakult Swallows fan. It was a beautiful spring day, cloudless, with a warm breeze blowing. There were no benches in the outfield seating area back then, just a grassy slope. I was lying on the grass, sipping a cold beer, gazing up occasionally at the sky, and enjoying the game. As usual, the stadium wasn't very crowded. It was the season opener, and the Swallows were taking on the Hiroshima Carp. Takeshi Yasuda was pitching for the Swallows. He was a short, stocky pitcher with a wicked curveball. He easily retired the side in the top of the first inning. The lead-off batter for the Swallows was Dave Hilton, a young American player who was new to the team. Hilton got a hit down the left-field line. The crack of bat meeting ball echoed through the stadium. Hilton easily rounded first and pulled up to second. And it was at just that moment that a thought struck me: *You know what*? *I could try writing a novel.* I still remember the wide-open sky, the feel of the new grass, the satisfying crack of the bat. Something flew down from the sky at that instant, and, whatever it was, I accepted it.

I didn't have any ambition to be a "novelist." I just had the strong desire to write a novel. I had no concrete image of what I wanted to write about—just the conviction that I could come up with something that I'd find convincing. When I thought about sitting down at my desk at home and starting to write, I realized that I didn't even own a decent fountain pen. So I went to the Kinokuniya store in Shinjuku and bought a sheaf of manuscript paper and a five-dollar Sailor pen. A small capital investment on my part.

By that fall, I'd finished a two-hundred-page handwritten work. I had no idea what to do with it, so I just let the momentum carry me and submitted it to the literary magazine *Gunzo's* new-writers' contest. I shipped it off without making a copy, so it seems I didn't much care if it wasn't selected and vanished forever. I was more interested in having finished the book than in whether or not it would ever see the light of day.

That year, the Yakult Swallows, the perennial underdog, won the pennant and went

on to defeat the Hankyu Braves in the Japan Series. I was really excited by this, and I attended several games at Korakuen Stadium. (Nobody had actually imagined that the Swallows would win, so their home venue, Jingu Stadium, had already been taken over by college baseball.) It was a particularly gorgeous autumn. The sky was clear and the ginkgo trees in front of the Meiji Memorial Gallery were more golden than I'd ever seen them. This was the last fall of my twenties.

By the following spring, when I got a phone call from an editor at *Gunzo* telling me that my novel had made the prize's short list, I'd completely forgotten having entered the contest. I'd been so busy with other things. But the novel went on to win the prize and was published that summer under the title "Hear the Wind Sing." It was well received, and, without really knowing what was going on, I suddenly found myself labelled a new, up-and-coming writer. I was surprised, but the people who knew me were even more surprised.

After this, while still running the jazz club, I produced a medium-length second novel, "Pinball, 1973." I also wrote a few short stories and translated some by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Both "Hear the Wind Sing" and "Pinball, 1973" were nominated for the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, but in the end neither won. I didn't care one way or the other. If I had won the prize, I'd have been taken up by interviews and writing assignments, and I was afraid that this would interfere with my duties at the club.

For three years I ran my jazz club—keeping the accounts, checking the inventory, scheduling my staff, standing behind the counter mixing cocktails and cooking, closing up in the wee hours of the morning, and only then being able to write, at home, at the kitchen table, until I got sleepy. I felt as if I were living two people's lives. And, gradually, I found myself wanting to write a more substantial kind of novel. I had enjoyed the process of writing my first two books, but there were parts of both that I wasn't pleased with. I was able to write only in spurts, snatching bits of time—a half hour here, an hour there—and, because I was always tired and felt as if I were competing against the clock, I was never able to concentrate very well. With this scattered kind of approach I was able to write a few interesting, fresh things, but the result was far from complex or profound. I felt as if I'd been given this wonderful opportunity to be a novelist, and I had a natural desire to take that opportunity as far as I possibly could. So, after giving it a lot of thought, I decided to close the business and focus solely on writing. At this point, my income from the jazz club was significantly more than my income as a novelist, a reality to which I resigned myself.

Most of my friends were adamantly against my decision, or at least had doubts about it. “Your business is doing fine now,” they said. “Why not just let someone else run it while you write your novels?” But I couldn’t follow their advice. I’m the kind of person who has to commit totally to whatever I do. If, having committed, I failed, I could accept that. But I knew that if I did things halfheartedly and they didn’t work out I’d always have regrets.

So, despite everyone’s objections, I sold the club and, a little embarrassedly, hung out my sign as a novelist. “I’d just like to be free to write for two years,” I explained to my wife. “If it doesn’t work out, we can always open up another bar somewhere. I’m still young and we’ll have time to start over.” This was in 1981 and we still had a considerable amount of debt, but I figured I’d just do my best and see what happened.

So I settled down to write my novel and, that fall, travelled to Hokkaido for a week to research it. By the following April, I’d completed “A Wild Sheep Chase.” This novel was much longer than the previous two, larger in scope and more story-driven. By the time I’d finished writing it, I had a good feeling that I’d created my own style. Now I could actually picture myself making a living as a novelist.

The editors at *Gunzo* were looking for something more mainstream, and they didn’t much care for “A Wild Sheep Chase.” Readers, though, seemed to love the new book, and that was what made me happiest. This was the real starting point for me as a novelist.

Once I had decided to become a professional writer, another problem arose: the question of how to keep physically fit. Running the club had required constant physical labor, but once I was sitting at a desk writing all day I started putting on the pounds. I was also smoking too much—sixty cigarettes a day. My fingers were yellow, and my body reeked of smoke. This couldn’t be good for me, I decided. If I wanted to have a long life as a novelist, I needed to find a way to stay in shape.

As a form of exercise, running has a lot of advantages. First of all, you don’t need someone to help you with it; nor do you need any special equipment. You don’t have to go to any particular place to do it. As long as you have a pair of running shoes and a good road you can run to your heart’s content.

After I closed the bar, I resolved to change my life style entirely, and my wife and I

moved out to Narashino, in the Chiba prefecture. The area was pretty rural back then, and there were no decent sports facilities around. But there was a Self-Defense Force base nearby, and the roads were well maintained. There was also a training area in the neighborhood near Nihon University, and if I went there early in the morning, when nobody else was around, I could use the track. So I didn't have to think too much about what activity to choose. I just took up running.

Not long after that, I also quit smoking. It wasn't easy to do, but I couldn't really run and keep on smoking. My desire to run was a great help in overcoming the withdrawal symptoms. Quitting smoking was also like a symbolic gesture of farewell to the life I used to lead.

At school I had never much cared for gym class or Sports Day, since these involved activities that were forced on me from above. But whenever I was able to do something I liked to do, when I wanted to do it, and the way I wanted to do it, I'd give it everything I had. Since I wasn't that athletic or coördinated, I wasn't good at the kind of sports where things are decided in a flash. Long-distance running suits my personality better, which may explain why I was able to incorporate it so smoothly into my daily life. I can say the same thing about me and studying. For my entire education, from elementary school through college, I was never interested in things that I was forced to study. As a result, although my grades weren't the kind you have to hide from people, I don't recall ever being praised for a good performance or a good grade, or being the best in anything. I began to enjoy studying only *after* I had made it through the educational system and become a so-called "member of society." If something interested me, and I could study it at my own pace, I was reasonably efficient at acquiring knowledge.

The best thing about becoming a professional writer was that I could go to bed early and get up early. When I was running the club, I often didn't get to sleep until nearly dawn. The club closed at twelve, but then I had to clean up, go over the receipts, sit and talk, and have a drink to relax. Do all that and, before you know it, it's 3 A.M. and sunrise is just around the corner. Often I'd still be sitting at my kitchen table, writing, as it started to get light outside. Naturally, by the time I woke up for the day, the sun was already high in the sky.

Once I began my life as a novelist, my wife and I decided that we'd go to bed soon

after it got dark and wake up with the sun. To our minds, this was a more natural, respectable way to live. We also decided that from then on we'd try to see only the people we wanted to see, and, as much as possible, get by without seeing those we didn't. We felt that, for a time at least, we could allow ourselves this modest indulgence.

In my new, simple, regular life, I got up before 5 A.M. and went to bed before 10 P.M. Different people are at their best at different times of day, but I'm definitely a morning person. That's when I can focus. Afterward, I work out or do errands that don't take much concentration. At the end of the day, I relax, read, or listen to music. Thanks to this pattern, I've been able to work efficiently now for twenty-seven years. It's a pattern, though, that doesn't allow for much of a night life, and sometimes this makes relationships with other people problematic. People are offended when you repeatedly turn down their invitations. But, at that point, I felt that the indispensable relationship I should build in my life was not with a specific person but with an unspecified number of readers. My readers would welcome whatever life style I chose, as long as I made sure that each new work was an improvement over the last. And shouldn't that be my duty—and my top priority—as a novelist? I don't see my readers' faces, so in a sense my relationship with them is a conceptual one, but I've consistently considered it the most important thing in my life.

In other words, you can't please everybody.

Even when I ran the club, I understood this. A lot of customers came to the club. If one out of ten enjoyed the place and decided to come again, that was enough. If one out of ten was a repeat customer, then the business would survive. To put it another way, it didn't matter if nine out of ten people didn't like the club. Realizing this lifted a weight off my shoulders. Still, I had to make sure that the one person who did like the place *really* liked it. In order to do that, I had to make my philosophy absolutely clear, and patiently maintain that philosophy no matter what. This is what I learned from running a business.

After "A Wild Sheep Chase," I continued to write with the same attitude that I'd developed as a business owner. And with each work my readership—the one-in-ten repeaters—increased. Those readers, most of whom were young, would wait patiently for my next book to appear, then buy it and read it as soon as it hit the bookstores. This was for me the ideal, or at least a very comfortable, situation. I went on writing

the kinds of things I wanted to write, exactly the way I wanted to write them, and, if that allowed me to make a living, then I couldn't ask for more. When my novel "Norwegian Wood" unexpectedly sold more than two million copies, things had to shift a little, but that was quite a bit later, in 1987.

When I first started running, I couldn't run long distances. I could run for only about twenty or thirty minutes. Even that left me panting, my heart pounding, my legs shaky. I hadn't really exercised for a long time. At first, I was also a little embarrassed to have people in the neighborhood see me running. But, as I continued to run, my body began to accept the fact that it was running, and I gradually increased my endurance. I acquired a runner's form, my breathing became more regular, and my pulse settled down. The main thing was not the speed or the distance so much as running every day, without fail.

So, like eating, sleeping, housework, and writing, running was incorporated into my daily routine. As it became a natural habit, I felt less embarrassed about it. I went to a sports store and purchased some running gear and some decent shoes. I bought a stopwatch, too, and read a book on running.

Looking back now, I think the most fortunate thing is that I was born with a strong, healthy body. This has made it possible for me to run on a daily basis for more than a quarter century now, competing in a number of races along the way. I've never been injured, never been hurt, and haven't once been sick. I'm not a great runner, but I'm a strong runner. That's one of the very few gifts I can be proud of.

The year 1983 rolled around and I participated in my first road race. It wasn't very long—a 5K—but for the first time I had a number pinned to my shirt and waited in a large group of other runners to hear an official shout, "On your mark, get set, go!" Afterward, I thought, Hey, that wasn't so bad! That May, I did a fifteen-kilometre race around Lake Yamanaka, and, in June, wanting to test how far I could go, I did laps around the Imperial Palace, in Tokyo. I went around seven times, for a total of 22.4 miles, at a fairly decent pace, and my legs didn't hurt at all. Maybe I could actually run a marathon, I concluded. Later, I found out the hard way that the toughest part of a marathon comes after twenty-two miles. (I have now competed in twenty-six marathons.)

When I look at photographs of me that were taken back in the mid-eighties, it's

obvious that I didn't yet have a runner's physique. I hadn't run enough, hadn't built up the requisite muscles; my arms were too thin, my legs too skinny. I'm impressed that I could run a marathon at all with a body like that. (Now, after years of running, my musculature has changed completely.) But even then I could feel physical changes happening every day, which made me really happy. I felt that, even though I was past thirty, I and my body still had some possibilities left. The more I ran, the more my potential was revealed.

Along with this, my diet started to change as well. I began to eat mostly vegetables, with fish as my main source of protein. I had never liked meat much anyway, and this aversion now became even more pronounced. I cut back on rice and alcohol and began using only natural ingredients. Sweets weren't a problem, since I had never much cared for them.

When I think about it, having the kind of body that easily puts on weight is perhaps a blessing in disguise. In other words, if I don't want to gain weight I have to work out hard every day, watch what I eat, and cut down on indulgences. People who naturally keep the weight off don't need to exercise or watch their diet. Which is why, in many cases, their physical strength deteriorates as they age. Those of us who have a tendency to gain weight should consider ourselves lucky that the red light is so clearly visible. Of course, it's not always easy to see things this way.

I think this viewpoint applies as well to the job of the novelist. Writers who are blessed with inborn talent can write easily, no matter what they do—or don't do. Like water from a natural spring, the sentences just well up, and with little or no effort these writers can complete a work. Unfortunately, I don't fall into that category. I have to pound away at a rock with a chisel and dig out a deep hole before I can locate the source of my creativity. Every time I begin a new novel, I have to dredge out another hole. But, as I've sustained this kind of life over many years, I've become quite efficient, both technically and physically, at opening those holes in the rock and locating new water veins. As soon as I notice one source drying up, I move on to another. If people who rely on a natural spring of talent suddenly find they've exhausted their source, they're in trouble.

In other words, let's face it: life is basically unfair. But, even in a situation that's unfair, I think it's possible to seek out a kind of fairness.

When I tell people that I run every day, some are quite impressed. "You must have a lot of will power," they tell me. Of course, it's nice to be praised like this—a lot better than being disparaged. But I don't think it's merely will power that makes one able to do something. The world isn't that simple. To tell the truth, I don't even think there's much correlation between my running every day and whether or not I have will power. I think that I've been able to run for more than twenty-five years for one reason: it suits me. Or, at least, I don't find it all that painful. Human beings naturally continue doing things they like, and they don't continue doing what they don't like.

That's why I've never recommended running to others. If someone has an interest in long-distance running, he'll start running on his own. If he's not interested in it, no amount of persuasion will make any difference. Marathon running is not a sport for everyone, just as being a novelist isn't a job for everyone. Nobody ever recommended or even suggested that I be a novelist—in fact, some tried to stop me. I simply had the idea to be one, and that's what I did. People become runners because they're meant to.

No matter how much long-distance running might suit me, of course there are days when I feel lethargic and don't want to do it. On days like that, I try to come up with all kinds of plausible excuses not to run. Once, I interviewed the Olympic runner Toshihiko Seko, just after he had retired from running. I asked him, "Does a runner at your level ever feel like you'd rather not run today?" He stared at me and then, in a voice that made it abundantly clear how stupid he thought the question was, replied, "Of course. All the time!"

Now that I look back on it, I can see what a dumb question it was. I guess that even back then I knew how dumb it was, but I wanted to hear the answer directly from someone of Seko's calibre. I wanted to know whether, although we were worlds apart in terms of strength and motivation, we felt the same way when we laced up our running shoes in the morning. Seko's reply came as a great relief. In the final analysis, we're all the same, I thought.

Now, whenever I feel like I don't want to run, I always ask myself the same thing: You're able to make a living as a novelist, working at home, setting your own hours. You don't have to commute on a packed train or sit through boring meetings. Don't you realize how fortunate you are? Compared with that, running an hour around the neighborhood is nothing, right? Then I lace up my running shoes and set off without

hesitating. (I say this knowing full well that there are people who'd pick riding a crowded train and attending meetings over running every day.)

At any rate, this is how I started running. Thirty-three—that's how old I was then. Still young enough, though no longer a young man. The age that Jesus Christ died. The age that F. Scott Fitzgerald started to go downhill. It's an age that may be a kind of crossroads in life. It was the age when I began my life as a runner, and it was my belated, but real, starting point as a novelist. ♦

(*Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.*)

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Haruki Murakami has published fourteen novels in English. His new book, "Murakami T: The T-Shirts I Love," translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel, will be published in November.