

FINISH LINE

EDITED BY MARK WILL-WEBER

Running Religiously By Jessa Vartanian

I heard the organ music first—deep, rich notes resonating through the stained glass windows of the old church ahead. Halfway through a 12-mile run, I was striding down a bacon-scented street, dreaming of breakfast bagels. Suddenly, the music ended, the front doors opened, and there on the sidewalk before me stood a tall, balding minister in heavy cream robes.

I raised my hand in greeting and called out, "Good morning!" He lobbed a joyous "Morning!" back, and then added, "Come in and exercise your spirit!"

His comment threw me at first. I didn't know how to reply. Ten yards later, I did. *But I am! Right now. Right here. Running down this tree-lined street, I am exercising my spirit!* The realization surprised me because I hadn't thought of it before.

From kindergarten through high school, Mom dragged me and my sisters to St. Ann's—a liberal church where kids were allowed to sit on the blue-carpeted steps that rose to the granite altar. Father Duryea always wore brown leather sandals, and I used to giggle when his toes wiggled during the Our Father.

At 18, I packed my life into cardboard boxes and drove 300 miles to college. Free to live my life as I chose, I chose not to go to church.

Church wasn't the only choice. There was running, too. Until then I'd run because my cross-country coach told

me to. Now, too slow for the collegiate team, I was free to give it up. But something inside told me not to.

Starting then, I ran because I wanted to. Because it made me feel strong, and whole, and human. Because it nourished my soul in a way nothing else did.

As my devotion to church waned, my devotion to running grew. And I've been running religiously ever since.

These days, at 31, Sunday mornings are still reserved for spiritual outings. An hour before sunrise, I crawl from the white cocoon of my down comforter. I pull on black tights and a long-sleeved T-shirt and drive to the open-space preserve near my house. I park in the middle of the empty lot, lace my key to my shoe and trot off. Through the silent darkness of predawn, I run alone.

I pass the tennis courts on my left, the ranger station on my right. Just beyond the wooden picnic tables, the trail begins to climb. Tall trees on both sides arch and meet like a tunnel, my deep, steady breathing echoing between their walls. A carpet of red and gold leaves cushions my steps. A trickling creek weaves in and out of sight as I climb higher, the timberline thinning to boulders and red-dirt hillsides.

Close to the summit, the sky grows lighter. A brown bunny scampers across the trail. A doe freezes in an open field and traces my path with huge, glassy eyes.

Forty-five minutes and 1,500 vertical feet later, I arrive at the top. Five minutes to sunrise. The old bench marks the summit: it's thick and weathered, young lovers' initials carved into the seat. I step up onto it, hands resting on hips, and gaze from my vista.

The base of the valley is laced with fog—thick swirls of gray cotton candy. Above the blanket, I can see for miles: mountains, foothills, a blue-gray panorama of sky.

And then, sunrise.

Brilliant rays of orange and gold pierce the sky like beams from a flashlight. I sigh, shut my eyes and feel the radiant glow inch up my face.

Standing there on the wooden bench, I am filled with a deep and quiet joy. I feel a reverence for life, a faith in mankind, a charity toward others. Standing there, witnessing the miraculous birth of a new day, I feel a connection to my creator—a connection that perhaps others feel in the old stone church.

Sometimes I even hear music up there. And when I do, I sing. **R**

Jessa Vartanian runs through the heavenly foothills of Northern California.

