



### Abstract

In this essay, the author discovers running as a way to cope with—and transcend—the quarantine in his hometown of Los Baños, Laguna. It culminates with a personal marathon, one that gets him to think (and question) his place in the world.

### Keywords

Running,  
COVID-19,  
quarantine,  
parks, exercise

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# RUN

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**WE CALL IT** the “mini-oval”: a small, open park surrounded by narra trees, with a walking path around it. If you look at the satellite maps, the three hectares of land appears like a wedge among the houses in our subdivision in Los Baños, but from the ground it looks like a circular field where people play Frisbee or jog around, especially on weekends, hence the allusion to the Academic Oval in Diliman.

During the quarantine, it was the only place I could go to, as it was right in front of our house. Strictly speaking, it was *my parents’* house since I’ve studied and worked in Manila and abroad throughout my adult life. But whenever I could, I tried to go there one or two weekends every month. And when it became clear that the whole country will be placed on “lockdown,” I decided to stay there to be with my parents, rather than be all by myself in Quezon City—where I worked as a researcher and lecturer—especially since my two siblings were abroad.

The park helped vindicate my decision. At least, I still had a place to walk: the most quotidian of activities that most people in the country found themselves unable to do. Barred from my usual activities of hiking, swimming, working out in the gym, and even just jogging around the real Oval (something I wish I had done more in the past), I began walking every day after overcoming the first few days of shock and immobilization. Probably because there was nothing else to do; no traffic to deal with; no errands to run, I grew to embrace the tempo of jogging and from March 22 onwards—less than a week after the imposition of the quarantine—I began running 10 kilometers every day.

As I developed the habit of running, I noticed things about the mini-oval that I never really noticed in the fifteen years that I've been spending days or weeks within its vicinity. First, the trees, chief of which were the narra: there were twenty two of them, planted during the very founding of the subdivision in the early 1990s; at a time when nobody thought that three hectares of open space in the outskirts of a small university town would be too valuable to be turned into a park. Two of the narra were *gemels*: two distinct trees that had merged in the trunk and henceforth have grown together. Many had acquired a livery of vines, moss, and even some aerial plants that must have found their way from Mount Makiling, the majestic mountain visible from the park itself.

The narra dominated the park, but one tree stood out not because of its presence but because of its fragrance: an ylang-ylang that I would encounter at the end of each 300-meter lap. Eventually, I realized that even the narra had their own scent when one by one, the trees bloomed with yellow-orange flowers, like a fireworks display playing out in ultra-slow motion. Even without those evanescent blooms, I would later feel—with growing conviction—that those forest trees also gave off an almost imperceptible but vaguely comforting scent for which we, with our visually dominant culture, do not have words.

Then there was the park fauna—cats of all colors, lizards large and small; if one looked closely, beetles and praying mantises; and if one got too careless, all kinds of ants. In the mornings, one could hear birdsong even from our house, and with the help of a dusty binoculars I dug up from the attic, and an equally dusty *A Guide to the Birds of the Philippines*, I identified the chestnut munias, olive-backed sunbirds (one male, one female), white-throated kingfishers, yellow-vented

bulbuls and, on the upper reaches of the narra trees, an occasional black-naped oriole. At the beginning, there were also some migratory brown shrikes, but soon they had departed for their summer homes in Korea, China, and Siberia, unaffected by humankind's travel restrictions. The little sunbirds—*tamsi* as we call them—were my favorite because they would hang out in a bougainvillea shrub near our house; I would see them from where I spot I converted into my workstation and hear their unmistakable high-pitched *swit-swit-swit* as I joined Zoom meetings and wrote my articles. To my horror, however, somebody cut the shrub one day and for a long time, I did not see them.

There were also a lot of frogs—or so I thought, until I was told by a biology professor that they were actually toads. There are some very important distinctions between the two, as the professor, who probably had a ready response to the taxonomically naive, patiently pointed out:

Frogs are aquatic; most toads live on land. Frogs have teeth; toads do not. Frogs are narrower; toads are wider, like little Jabba the Huts. Frogs have smooth, slimy skin; toads have rough, bumpy skin. The bumps, however, aren't warts, and no, a person can't get warts from a toad. However, toads have glands behind their eyes that can secrete a burning milky toxin.

The Philippine toads (now I know!) would emerge by the dozens at night and it would be a challenge to avoid stepping on them as they seem to love the cement of the jogging path as much as I did.

Of course, there were humans too. The ones who have been walking all their lives and the ones like me who were just as determined as me to keep fit or stay sane during the pandemic. My parents—both about to turn 60 at the start of the quarantine—belonged to the first category. An environmental scientist who in youth was varsity football player and in his adult life as a regular at the local tennis club, my father walked around the park twice a day: after breakfast and before dinner, wearing a bush hat and—when it's raining—an umbrella. My mother—who he met in college and would describe herself as a “proud housewife” despite her own academic credentials—joined him

at night, after spending much of the day tending to her indoor and outdoor plants.

Other regulars included a former high-ranking bureaucrat in his 70s and his wife; two men in their 60s who used the walk as an opportunity to chat; an athletic-looking couple in their 30s (complete with 42k finisher shirts, lest anyone disagree) who would alternate between running and just walking; and a lanky college guy who would retire by the monkey bars after his thirty-minute, five-kilometer run, lost in the virtual world of his smartphone. I hardly ever talked to any of them, but I would like to imagine that we understood, and even supported, each other.

Such was our peaceful routine for a month or so, until one day, a village guard flashed a “Stay at Home” placard around the park, explaining that they had been ordered by the homeowners association president to stop people from jogging. *But there’s nobody else around! How can this be considered a risky activity?* My run interrupted, I wanted to argue, but I knew it was not my place, given that my parents may want to avoid a confrontation with the neighbors. Shocked and agitated, I jogged in place at home, determined to continue running 10 kms a day. Fortunately, such a draconian measure was short-lived: the next day, people were jogging again, as if nothing happened. Perhaps some of the joggers who were influential in the village protested. Or the officials realized the absurdity in making people not use an open space without people.

In any case, we made a silent pact to avoid each other’s schedules: I blocked off the 7:30–8:15 a.m. for my morning run: by then, most found it too hot to walk, and then, a 6:30–7:15 PM for my evening run: it was early enough to avoid the neighbors’ fears of nocturnal strangers, but late enough to catch the rising of the moon. Only the college guy showed up that late, but we somehow adjusted to each other’s pace: by running at the same speed, we could stay as far away from each other within the same track. By some unwritten rule that predated the pandemic, we all ran counter-clockwise. *Eventually, as mask wearing became the social norm, I decided to move my schedule even later to just do a one 10-km run at night, from 8:45 to 10:00 p.m.* If I felt really good, and the weather was really great—cool and dry—I could complete the 10 km in less than an hour, with my progress duly recorded by my smartwatch.

I also noticed about things about my body and learned the care required to make me run better and safer. I discovered that even the tightness of shoelaces and the thickness of the socks can spell the difference between a painful knee and a refreshing run. I also learned that a heavy meal can slow me from my usual 6km/minute to almost 7, so I made it a policy not to run within two hours of a meal. Finally I realized that the swinging of the arms can propel your body: one must not be afraid to move, even sway, one's body, until the run becomes like a dance. Thankfully, my body largely cooperated, to a point that even when it started to rain in May and the paths were moist, it was as if my body was urging me to keep walking and for much of the quarantine I managed to maintain my daily runs.

Eventually, I also developed my running style, choosing the best tank tops and shorts, applying petroleum jelly on my underarms to prevent chafing, and compiling playlists of songs that would make me enjoy the run. Music propelled me: a song I don't particularly like could slow me down but my favorite songs—and my favorite parts of those songs—could measurably boost my tempo.

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One song that I really liked to begin the run, especially in the morning, with is from an animé series called *Hunter X Hunter*, which is a story of exploration and friendship. The song is called "Ohayou" (Good morning) and is perfect for starting the day:

I tell you "good morning" and I fall into a dream again  
and I'm fine with that kind of natural way-of-living.

When I looked up the full lyrics, I turned out to be actually a love song and the singer waxes romantic about calling someone on a telephone (how 1990s! The word *telebabad* comes to mind). I suppose it's really not so much the message, but how it reminds me of elementary school, in the same way that Christiana Aguilera and Britney Spears remind me of my older sister with whom I used to watched MTV all day, in those summers of our childhood; in the same way that Eminem and Savage Garden remind me of the tempestuous, *Catcher in the Rye* emotions of my high school days.

In the end, however, I gravitated toward OPM songs. I had an entire folder of Eraserheads songs that have somehow survived from one computer or hard drive to another, dating back to my graduate student days in Amsterdam, when I would jog on weekends in Oosterpark, and those lines in “Harana” (Kung ako ang papipiliin / Ay nag-Amsterdam na ako) never failed to make me smile. Years later, as I jogged under the narra trees, I tried to glean some philosophical insights from the Eraserheads songs, written as they were in a different era, as when they compared life to assembly of pencils:

Field trip sa may pagawaan ng lapis  
Ay katulad ng buhay natin  
Isang mahabang pila  
Mabagal at walang katuturan

Some years back, while camped in a mountain called El Mistí in the Peruvian Andes, the local mountaineers asked me to play a song from my country, and because the moon was unusually bright, I decided to play Ben&Ben’s “Maybe the Night,” which would end up as the first song in my nocturnal running playlist. As most of the people could not speak English, I translated the lyrics into my beginner’s Spanish and since I tried to make the translation rhyme with the song, it would resurface in my mind whenever I would hear its chorus:

Tal vez la noche / tenga algo de esperanza  
Tal vez de ti / yo pueda estar cerca  
Quédate juntos aquí

“What a beautiful song,” they told me.

After each run, I felt as if I had traveled to different places and memories.

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The quarantine kept getting extended, two weeks or one month at a time. I lost track of all the policies and their corresponding acronyms—ECQ, MECQ, GCQ, MECQ—and their variations. Weekends and weekdays became meaningless distinctions as one day just moved to another, with

the only events that marked the passage of time being the 4 p.m. briefings of the health department on the number of cases, deaths, recoveries. Because I would run at night, I observed the waxing and waning of the moon, witnessing its serene majesty. “Moon has never glowed this color,” Ben&Ben crooned in their song, and there were times when indeed the moon looked special, as in those cold and starry nights in the Andes. I also had the chance to see nighttime thunderstorms, with Mt. Makiling being bombarded with light, like a beautiful fireworks show of which my only regret is the lonely feeling that that no one else is watching. When I was younger, out of naiveté, I penned these lines in an essay but later thought it was naive. During the quarantine, however, perhaps it was not as naive as I thought:

Many people have been surrounded by butterflies and serenaded by birds without noticing it. Countless shooting stars have passed without anyone making a wish, but surely they are visible to those who open their eyes to the beauty of the world.

Running proved rewarding for my body: the snoring that made me feel awkward when rooming with other people disappeared (a smartphone app which used to give me a “Snore score” of 98 gave me just “1” or “0”), and the six-pack abs that I once tried in vain to achieve began to appear in the mirror. “I’ve flattened the curve!” I jokingly told my friends—at least those close enough for me to share my topless selfies.

Even so, a strange feeling gripped me. It wasn’t loneliness, which I had long been used to: I’ve lived by myself for many years, and being single was the rule, not the exception, in my life. Nor was it the disappointment over all the cancelled conferences and hiking plans. Perhaps it had more to do with the uncertainty and the sudden, sweeping changes: Even going to the supermarket, where you have to wear a mask, and later, even a face shield, was a suffocating experience; when you finally get home your urge is to take a shower, as if the world itself has become infectious and dangerous. Perhaps it also had to do with the feeling of being trapped: Not traveling is one thing, but *not being able to do so* is another. And of course there was also the frustration over how the government was handling the crisis: a retired soldier was shot to death by police officers for allegedly violating quarantine rules; a construction worker was

arrested for tweeting something critical of the president. Friends expressed concern that I, too, having publicly aired my views in print and in social media, may be targeted.

But what else can I do at a personal level, other than make the most of the situation? With all the running I did daily, I was too tired to worry at night, and despite normally sleeping past midnight prior to the pandemic, I was asleep before the president's late night addresses.

As my birthday—the 6th of May—approached, however, the feeling of being trapped was exacerbated the thought that I couldn't celebrate the way I used to: by climbing a mountain. Sometimes, I managed to organize a big trip: the previous year, for instance, I spent my birthday week in Japan, climbing three mountains in the Kansai region, rewarding myself with an *onsen* bath and a sushi dinner after each one. There were also times when I had to content myself with a simple dayhike, as in the year before, when I hiked with Jerald Polintan, my visually impaired teenage friend, up Mt. Maculot in Batangas. What remained constant, since my college days, was that I went up a mountain on my birthday.

Deprived of this personal tradition, I decided to do a half-marathon in the park. I had been running 10 kms every day, so doubling it (and then some) would not be so much of a stretch, but it would still be something meaningful as I've never run more than 10 kilometers in my life.

And so, on my birthday I woke up at 5:00 a.m., carrying a bottle of water and a hand towel, placing it on a rock near one of the narra trees and started running. I was bursting with excitement, but I tried to keep calm, just pacing myself steadily and treating it like a normal run. Thankfully, all my moving parts seemed to hold up—no pain in my hips, knees, and ankles—and I was moving a nice pace of around 6'40" per kilometer. *So far so good!* I kept telling myself. *You really have to think one kilometer at a time, otherwise, the thought of running for over two hours will overwhelm you.* By the time the sun rose, I had already covered my usual 10 kms, and as each kilometer was the farthest I've ever run, the mini-accomplishment every four laps around the mini-oval energized me. *I can actually do this!*

By the 16th kilometer, the two familiar figures of my life appeared, and true to form, my parents started taking pictures of me as they themselves walked. We literally did a victory lap around the park to celebrate the



occasion, followed by the usual picture taking and of course a hearty, birthday-worthy meal. According to my watch, the half-marathon took me 2 hours and 22 minutes to complete. “That’s a good time!” My athletic friends, who had encouraged me to go for it, enthused. “You can do a full marathon once this is all over!”

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Meanwhile, the quarantine kept getting extended even further in what pundits called “mass testing of patience.” I tried learning new skills, some successfully (like brewing my own coffee); others less so (like practicing yoga). I also tried tasting all the “quarantine treats” that became popular among my friends, some of which I really loved (like ube cheese pandesal); others much less so (like baked sushi). It was a privilege, of course, to be able to concern with myself with the above. To position one’s self as grounded and engaged on the one hand, but also to be inescapably more privileged than those I try to speak for, on the other, is a struggle that will haunt an academic like me.

Some days I was very productive, writing commentaries on all sorts of topics, from mental health to the importance of the youth vote. But sometimes, I just stare at the computer or smartphone screen, randomly scrolling down my Twitter feed, and yet still feel tired afterwards. Some days, I could work from morning till evening, but some days, not even a siesta, or an entertaining TV series, could relieve my mental fatigue. But one constant in my pandemic life was the fact that after each run, I felt better, making it easier for me to make it an inevitable part of each day.

Not even a typhoon, Ambo, stopped me: It was rainy and windy the day it brushed past our province, but sometime in the late morning the rains subsided a bit and I took the opportunity to run, prepared to turn back if the winds or rain became stronger. Thankfully, it didn’t in the hour I was running, allowing me to complete my 10 kilometers. If anything, the wind made the run much more pleasant. The typhoon ushered in the wet season, during which daytime runs became more bearable. Sudden, torrential rains sometimes caused power outages that would in turn trigger me to run, and usually, by the end of my mileage goal, I could already hear television sounds from the neighboring houses.

But even running had started to become boring, and with no mountain, no adventure, in sight, I decided that I needed a new challenge. When it became clear that the pandemic would drag on for several more months, I told myself that I would go for a personal full marathon. It takes three months to train for one—so my friends told—and by June I already qualified on this basis. It would give me something to look forward to, thereby making the days themselves run even faster.

Such a decision notwithstanding, I kept putting it off, because of body issues: I had reflux that my doctor—consulted virtually—thought might be caused by all the running I was doing. The start of a semester meant preparing course packs and dealing with students. All I could muster was the 10 kilometer daily routine.

But I could not put it off indefinitely. I decided that, just as the half-marathon made my birthday special, I would use the full marathon to make my mother's upcoming one even more so. She would turn 60 and be a senior citizen on her birthday; technically she would not allowed to go out then—hence, even a simple lunch in Tagaytay was out of the question. And neither were guests coming to visit. There would have been a program, with people bearing gifts and giving testimonials, a nice party, with all my mother's relatives and friends. But in the middle of a pandemic, we had to make do with ourselves.

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They day of the marathon finally came on September 29th, on the eve of my mother's 60th birthday. By then, the days were shorter, the nights cooler. Some who had been diligent in walking around the park had already slacked off, perhaps burnt out, preoccupied with the inevitable demands of work and the interminable quarantine. But some continued—like the bureaucrat and his wife, the two old friends, and the couple who still continued with their alternation between running and walking. One of the cats in the park had given birth in one of the pots in our garage, and perhaps grateful for the hospitality, she would keep watch over me. Nourished by the monsoon rains, the bougainvillea shrub had regained its garland of ochre flowers and to my great joy the two sunbirds reappeared. The narra, of course, were as majestic as ever.

I started at exactly at 6 p.m., just as the gibbous moon was rising. Hours earlier, I had already prepared a liter of *buko* juice that would be

my sole energy throughout the run. I had also assembled a playlist of my favorite songs, making sure that both the earphones and the watch would be fully charged. I chose my favorite tank top and running shorts, and stuck with the running shoe I've used throughout—despite its worn-out soles: by that time, it had already run over 2,000 kilometers.

Things went smoothly for the first twenty kilometers. Thankfully, I had the park to myself, and as it had not rained all the day, the path was dry. I tried not to think in terms of 42 kilometers. Instead, I wanted to conceive of the run as four of those 10 kilometer sets I had been doing every day. By the time I reached the two final kilometers, I was sure there was enough momentum to sustain me.

It was past the 21st kilometer that things began to become challenging. From this point onward, every step was setting a record of my longest ever run and while this awareness excited me, a drizzle and the threat of heavier rain kept my emotions in check. My right foot began to complain, and I began to count every kilometer—and look forward to the buko juice breaks every five, then four, then three kilometers. I grasped for milestones to lift my spirit: 21 was of course the halfway mark, 25 had a nice ring to it, and 30 meant that I just need to do one more of the nightly runs—plus the final two kilometers that was practically a victory lap.

*I have to keep going*, I told myself, and I knew that I was thinking not just about the run but about my life itself. I remembered my childhood, when I was bullied and called *lampa* being somewhat tall but not really masculine, never possessing the *angas* of my peers. I remembered the moments during high school and college when somehow I felt out of place in the world itself, only to somehow carry on, managing to convince myself that I can still make my life worthwhile. *I cannot let my previous selves down. And I cannot deprive my future selves of a moment that could give them strength.*

These self-motivational thoughts kept me going, but it was the surprise appearance of my parents at around 10 p.m. that made a difference. They had come to cheer me on and take pictures! “Thirty-five kilometers!” I told them. My pace quickened; it was reinvigorated. They decided to wait.

And then, finally, it was all over! I reached the 42-kilometer mark at a 10:48 p.m.—after 4 hours and 44 minutes of running, and 4 minutes of breaks. The marathon was done, and I had not collapsed, and I reached for a gulp of water even as I was filled with sweat and tears. My parents

had reappeared, and, as in my birthday, we did a victory lap. “How was it?” my mother asked.

My smile must have confirmed what she already knew: I was happy. I was happy that my body cooperated, and that I had done something that people strive to do at least once in their lifetime. I was happy for the company too: I looked at my parents and their increasingly-greying hair, in the final hour before my mother’s senior citizenship, I knew that if not for the quarantine, I may never spend such a long period of time with them in my adult life: a moment that I will cherish in the future.

But joy was not the only emotion I held at that moment. My body may have triumphed but the marathon also made me feel, more than ever before, the frailty of my limbs, the fraughtness of my body—and the fact that I could not race against aging, the indecipherable lumps, the thorns of my flesh. I may have accomplished one of the greatest physical feats of my life, but my body felt more fragile than ever. Hours later, after I had eaten to my heart’s content, I would feel this more acutely with the painful chafing on the edges of my tank top. *Too much of something—even just taking one step, the tank top brushing against your skin—can hurt.*

While I was doing the run, however, I could at least take comfort in the fact that all I needed to do was to take one step at a time. My body may have been frail but not with the momentum; not at the moment. Like the quarantine itself, the run had its own internal logic, and once you have adjusted, all you had to do was continue. It was like a bubble in spacetime. The president could have announced some crazy new rule, a volcano could have erupted, a world-changing event could have taken place, but in those four or five hours, I was locked in my own trajectory, like a planet in orbit; like Halley’s Comet whose once- or twice-in-a-lifetime visits had already been preordained.

Once the run was over, however, I had to wrestle with life again and how I could continue to live it. The pandemic, still raging, has cost so much, and it will take time to grapple with the unbridgeable chasm between the past and the future. I may have run a long distance, but many have walked much longer just to go to their homes. I thought of the children struggling to learn, the adults struggling to earn a living, my colleagues who had lost their jobs; my friends who—like me—felt unsure as to whether, at the end of this all, we would still have retained the will to live. I thought of my dead grandmother who I’m glad did not live to see all the separation and the heartache, even as I knew that had she been

around, she should surely have found a way for her love to reach all her children and grandchildren. I thought of the work ahead, the daunting new normal of online classes, of face masks and face shields, and that never-ending cycle of lockdowns. I was already unsure about my career and life plans even before the pandemic, and with all the uncertainty, I was even farther away from knowing the path I should take.

As I wobbled my way back to our house, I took one final view of moonlit narra trees that have borne witness to my personal marathon, and—throughout six months and counting—all the sweat and tears I have shed under their shadows. Maybe our lives are indeed like pencils in a factory, circular, predetermined, ultimately meaningless. But maybe the night holds a little hope for all of us, for all our suspended dreams, our interrupted bonds, our imperiled planet. Maybe our wishes have already been granted, and they are on the way, like light from a distant star.

At that point in my life, all I knew was that the world will never be the same again, and that I would I have to keep running.