

# The Strange Running Club

by Jim Gold

Jason woke in the morning feeling a deep sadness. He called it “cosmic depression.” He didn’t know why he felt this way every morning. Could it be the transience of life? Or the fact he had to go back to work in the law office he hated?

He consulted with himself: “Cosmic depression is a common occurrence, a given part of my daily existence. It’s a meaning thing. Is there an answer? I know that when I dive into daily tasks, my gray veil lifts, the fog disappears, and I feel better. How strange.”

Jason’s self-consultations bore fruit when he realized that his daily sadness cosmic event was a running problem. He had posted an inferior time in his first marathon. Now he wanted to increase his speed and come in under four hours. “Bob did it in three hours and twenty-six minutes, and he’s only a year older than I am,” he complained to his hidden self.

“You’re so competitive,” was the only answer he received.

Jason admitted it was time to start seeing his running therapist, Dr. Bosley Strange, or “Marathon Mike” as his patients fondly called him.

The following Wednesday, driving in from New Jersey, Jason fought the usual traffic crossing the George Washington Bridge. But this time, instead of frustrated rage, yelling at the drivers, and cursing at the toll booth, he found the honks and the screams of other drivers acted as a stimulant for his competitive juices, a soothing mental warm-up, and preparation for the struggle ahead.

After two hours of driving, he finally reached the doctor’s forty-third-floor Empire State Building office. As he sat on the sofa in the waiting room, he read the inspirational aphorisms hanging in frames on the wall, attributed the Hellenic philosopher of Canarsie, Pheidipides Peripopolous of Brooklyn.

Blessed are the obstacles.

Fun is ecstasy in one syllable.

The rewards of victory are more of the same.

Greeting his former patient at the door, Dr Strange extended his hand.

“Welcome back and forth, Jason.”

Face flushed, shoulders hunched, primed and ready, Jason dashed to the red armchair and sank onto its friendly leather. Brilliant sunlight streaming in through a southeast window flooded the office.

The doctor sat down in his chair, said nothing, and waited. Jason leaned back in the armchair, and drifted into his usual depression. Ten-minute later, when he began to sniffle and cry, Dr Strange offered him a box of tissues. “Have you made any progress in your quest for higher learning?” he asked.

After an initial bout of nose-blowing, Jason coughed out, “My running stinks. I’m too slow.”

Four minutes passed. The doctor answered. “Are you sure?”

Jason was suddenly energized. “What a stupid question!” he boiled. “What is the matter with you? Why do I even bother coming here?”

“. . . You’re a strange patient.”

“Me? You’re the one that’s strange. Look at your name”

“That is true.”

Jason lapsed into silence, fixing his eyes on the shadow behind the doctor’s chair. A gurgle rose in his throat as he cogitated on high alert. “. . . Am I wrong? Perhaps your name isn’t Strange. Perhaps I’m talking to myself because I am strange.”

Dr. Strange rose from his chair to place a kindly hand on Jason’s head. “Very insightful of you. Yes, I too am Strange. We are brothers under the same strange flesh.”

He lit his pipe, balanced it on his ashtray, and returned to his seat. “Look, Jason, people are all strange. We are mirrors of strangiosity. Let’s explore ours. Strange people need to stick together.”

“But I don’t want to be strange. I want to be normal.”

“That really is strange. Are you sure?”

“Now you’re making me doubt myself.”

“Doubt is the first step toward knowledge. But let’s get back to your running speed.”

Jason nodded. “How can I increase my speed, especially if I doubt myself?”

Dr. Strange smiled. “We’ll find out. The opposite of the strange is the known. And I know you can run a marathon under four hours.”

“How do you know that?”

“Oh, it’s a fact. The bigger question is: Are facts important? And do you see them differently?”

“. . . I never looked at them like that.”

“Of course you didn’t. Strange people don’t see straight. Their vision is naturally crooked.”

Dr. Strange rose again, reached into his closet, and pulled out a pair of running shoes. “Did you bring your shorts and running shoes?”

“Of course.”

“Okay. Go change in the bathroom, and let’s go.”

The two suited runners took the elevator downstairs, and began a slow jog down Thirty-fourth Street.

They ran in silence past stores, waited at stop lights, crossed avenues until they reached Fifty-ninth Street. By the time they ran past Columbus Circle and entered Central Park, most of Jason’s daily concerns had slipped away. His unconscious, warmed and loosened by the long run, felt free to release a torrent of complaints.

His speed increased. “It’s been a fuzzy year,” he panted. “I’ve tried to maintain my marathon training, even my wandering instinct, but I’ve been getting nowhere. Any hope of a grand purpose has dribbled away.”

Dr. Strange increased his pace as they turned down a bike path. “Well, old directions need new sparks,” he declared. “Try connecting to your inner strangeness. Then your direction will no longer matter, since all directions lead to the same place.”

Jason’s eyes began to tear as they passed the lake. “And what place is that?”

Dr. Strange reached into the pocket of his running shorts, pulled out a handkerchief, and handed it to his sweating patient. “Good. You’re feeling sorry for

yourself. But tears and self-pity are not the way to salvation.”

Jason wiped away his tears. “Easy for you to say. At least you’re being paid.”

“Drop your hostility, my lad. Anger, rage, frustration are fine for ‘known’ folks, those who focus only on facts. But remember, you aren’t like them. Your way must be different.”

The alarm in the doctor’s left running pocket rang. He pulled it out and looked. “Time’s up,” he sighed. “Back to the office. We’ll pick it up again next Wednesday.”

That day they stopped for a red light at Thirty-eighth, trotted past the pigeons feeding near the statue of Columbus at the Circle, and again entered the park.

Jason slowed. “I run so slowly,” he complained. “Yesterday, on a local street in New Jersey, I tried picking up my pace. I tried running fast as I could. I panted, pushed, and gave it my all. As I passed a Jehova’s Witness on the street, she smiled, held up her bible, and cheerily said, ‘Have a nice walk.’ Can you imagine how I felt?”

“Is that your question for the day?”

“Yes. How can I run faster?”

“You can run faster by going slower. Truth is, the slower you go, the faster you go. Here’s how it works. When you start to run, you move as slowly as you can until you reach bottom, a place where it feels like you’re hardly moving at all. That, in micro-running parlance, is called the transformation spot, the mysterious place where slow meets fast.

Silence followed. They passed a maple tree. “At that point, although you’re practically flying, it feels like you’re hardly moving. And vice versa.”

Dr. Strange stopped to tie his shoe. “It’s all the same. Slow is fast, fast is slow. Knowing this is a lifetime challenge. It’s why we’re running together today.”

Jason asked, “Is there a technique to this practice?”

“Yes. Here’s where your lesson begins.”

The doctor slowed to a pre warm-up jog.

“Good! I can’t wait to hear it.” Jason, getting excited, surged ahead.

The doctor shouted as he almost disappeared down the path, “That’s your problem! You’re going to fast. Slow down.”

Jason stopped.

The doctor caught up. “Here, do this with me.” Strange jogged very slowly, almost in place. In the next five minutes he hardly moved five feet. “The principles of micro-running are biblical: ‘The last shall be first.’ In order to win this race, you must come in behind me.”

“That sounds very strange.”

“Of course. That’s why we’re here.”

Jason tried it. After losing to the good doctor fourteen times in a row, he gave up. “I can’t do this,” he said. “Slow is too hard.”

“Complain, complain,” said the doctor. “Always complaining. Just like your first session. Coming in last is as easy as coming in first. Only it takes practice and a different mind set.”

Jason’s sessions with Dr. Strange continued over the decade, meeting weekly or monthly. When Jason’s business moved to China, they carried on for three years with phone sessions, and Jason ran through Beijing with buds in his ears.

Over time, he also met other Strange patients, all of whom had benefitted from the doctor’s unique healing methods and philosophy,

Eventually, the doctor decided to expand his practice by starting the group therapy Strange Running Club. Meeting once a week in midtown Manhattan, they all ended a run in Central Park.

Time passed. Strange planned the future of his practice. Working together with a New York real estate magnate, he acquired a tract of land with good Westchester running fields and hills in Rye, New York. One year later they broke ground for Fun and Ecstasy Village: A Strange Running Permanent Retirement Community.

Soon most of his former patients moved in.

Jason did too.

His lessons with Dr. Strange continued. He pursued his disciplines, perfecting his micro-running technique, blending slow and fast, and increased his struggle to be last.

Finally, after eighty-two years, at the age of one hundred and two, he beat the good doctor in the annual Over-One Hundred Birthday Celebration run.

Fourteen former patients also participated.

“The younger ones always beat me,” Dr. Strange complained,

“Complain, complain,” said Jason. “Always complaining.”

Then they all went out for a beer.

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