

# OUTRUNNING AGE



*A Memoir*

MEETING MIDLIFE WITH COURAGE,  
COMPASSION, AND A FEW BLISTERS

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Outrunning Age: Meeting Midlife With Courage, Compassion, and a Few Blisters

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To my husband, Tom.

In the marathon of life, you are my aid station.

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## Preface

# Out of One Life and Into Another

*It's impossible, said Pride. It's risky, said Experience. It's pointless, said Reason. Give it a try, whispered the Heart.*

—Unknown

I didn't realize it at the time, but I started running out of my first marriage the day I took my stepdaughter's tennis shoes and headed out to the sugarcane fields that surrounded our antebellum home. The day before, I had walked the fifty yards from the front porch, past the three-hundred-year-old oaks, to the mailbox, and was shocked to discover that the walk had made me winded. I put two fingers to my neck and felt my pulse flutter like oak leaves in a Louisiana thunderstorm. As I strolled back, bills in hand, heart racing, I thought, "I am too damn young to be this out of shape." With that declaration, at age thirty-seven, I became a runner before I even took my first step.

It took me a while to own it, however. I thought runners ran marathons in record time without stopping to catch their breath and collected medals as proof of their efforts. I was too slow to be a real runner, I told myself, so at first I mostly walked through the fields at dusk, the sun raking low over the green tops of the sugar cane. I liked leaving my sneaker tracks alongside those of the raccoons and deer who sometimes shared the headrows with me.

The headrows are the streets of the fields. As I ran, I focused on avoiding tripping over the tractor ruts, a practice that kept me from ruminating too much on the strained state of my once-happy relationship. I also wanted to avoid the heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach whenever I thought back to *The Way Things Used To Be* and compared them to *How They Are Now*. I tried to outrun the tears. Sometimes the dog trotted alongside me. I spoke my fears and concerns to her, but she didn't have many answers.

Off I went, ten minutes out, ten minutes back, six days a week, leaping over the occasional snake and getting cut by the stray sugar cane leaf. After two weeks I decided that I either needed go farther or faster, and I chose faster. I could soon run one mile without stopping, then two. Only after six months of this did I commit enough to purchase my own running shoes. I gratefully returned my stepdaughter's shoes to her closet, the mileage on them a little higher.

A year after I first took those shoes, the day came for me to run out of my marriage for real. I packed up my running shoes and wedding silver and ran into my new life. I was sad and relieved, all at the same time. Running gave me a comforting structure to my days. I missed the headrows, the white-tailed deer, the cycles of the cane, and the raccoon tracks, but I did not miss my fractured marriage as I settled into my new home near several peaceful lakes.

The lakes are populated with herons, visiting white pelicans, and—this being Louisiana—the occasional alligator. Two-story Louisiana State University (LSU) sorority houses line one side of the lake, their plantation-style structure making rippling reflections on the water. Turtles catch the sun on partially submerged logs, lining up like railroad cars, the biggest one in the prime spot and the rest arranged in hierarchical rows. Cypress, live

oak, and mimosa trees—Louisiana ambassadors—stand proudly around the perimeter, and the squirrels scold (or maybe encourage) runners as they pass.

‘Real runners run here, all the way around the lakes, four miles without stopping’, I thought to myself. I wasn’t a “real runner” yet, so I just ran two miles in my neighborhood each day, filling the steps with affirmations. I mentally chanted mantras in sync with my pace. I love myself. I love my body. My body runs easily. My body loves to run.

However, I also thought, I am too curvy to be a real runner. I waited in vain for the miles to make me a broad-shouldered, straight-hipped, no-body-fat runner. My unhelpful comparison to more experienced runners made me blind to the fact that being curvy and busty wouldn’t keep me from gradually improving my pace. My leg muscles were strong, and when I tightened them, I was surprised to see that my quadriceps muscles were becoming more defined, and I could now see my leg biceps in the back. I continued to run toward new possibilities with each step.

Having no husband around to occupy my days opened up opportunities to make male friends. One of my first new friends was a long-time runner, as in, I-just-added-up-my-lifetime-mileage-and-it’s-enough-to-have-run-around-the-Earth kind of long-time runner. He introduced me to a group of his friends whose idea of travel was to research a city they had never been to and where a marathon was going to be held, and then meet there and run the race. I was in awe of and intimidated by these folks, and I dreamed of one day being able to keep pace with them instead of watching their backs pull away from me.

Hanging out with a pack of elite and seasoned runners was both a good thing and a bad thing. I kept up with my running so that I could be one of them, but I beat myself up because I fell short of their pace. My best-ever time at this point was “only” an eight-minute mile, whereas most of the others ran 7:30s or faster. I mostly hung back in a 9:30 to 10:30

range, not seeing that I was the only one who was judging me. No matter how many miles I ran, I was unable to outrun my self-criticism.

One day a neighbor saw me go out the door in my running clothes and asked, “You running the lakes today?” I launched into my rationale for how I wasn’t a real runner; I didn’t run races, and I could only run two miles. The more I talked, though, the more I realized how silly I sounded. In case I missed it, my neighbor burst out laughing and said, “I see you run every day. How can you not call yourself a runner?”

Sometimes it feels good—and terrifying—to face our self-imposed limitations. I immediately took off for a run around the larger of the two LSU lakes—all four miles of it. My ego came along with me and offered such helpful comments as, “*You know you can’t do this. You can only run a couple of miles. You’re really slow, anyway. A ten-minute mile isn’t that fast.*” Like a lousy friend with a loudspeaker, my ego threw doubts at me with every step, trying to trip up my confidence. Sure enough, I ran out of gas around the two-mile mark, clear on the other side of the lake from my car. I walked for a bit and then ran the rest.

As I unlocked my car and plopped, hot and sweaty, into the driver’s seat, it hit me. I had just run the LSU lakes. Damn. Maybe I was a runner.

## Chapter 1

# The Starting Line

*Aging is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength.*

—Betty Friedan

*Age is no barrier. It's a limitation you put on your mind.*

—Jackie Joyner Kersee

I could tell the second I lowered into the one-legged squat that I was trying one rep too many. My brain told my muscles to fire, and time slowed down.

“Come on, you can do it,” my trainer said. I wanted to please this thirty-five-year-old father of two, who wore his hair in a man bun and whose family tattoo was molded over his cut bicep. I had just started working out with a new trainer after a year-long hiatus. Before I had taken the time off from training, I had gone through an intense two-week period during which I got married at age fifty-five, lost my dad, and parted ways with my biggest client. Healing from the psychological changes had taken longer than I had expected, and I was eager to resume regular physical activity.

There was no *pop*, no sudden movement of the dynamic mechanism that was my knee, to herald the injury that happened just then. Instead, the rubber band ligaments that cradled the joint simply stretched past their ability to rebound. I wondered if, at age fifty-seven, I had lost my stretch, as well. I felt like I had just slammed headlong into what it meant to be getting older.

I held on to my trainer's hands, both for dear life and for my future, and gritted my teeth as my body gave its last drop of glucose to help me rise to a wobbly standing position.

“Good job!” Man Bun exclaimed, going for the high five. I tried to feel proud of myself, not knowing that one squat too many was going to halt my running and workouts for the next eight months.

### **The Knee**

The day after one-too-many squats, my knee swelled up like a balloon with too much air. Bending it felt weird, but I thought I just needed to lay off it for a week or so. Gradually the swelling came down, and my trainer and I tried new activities. Rowing machine: knee swelled. Cycle warmups: knee swelled. Running: *ouch*. Everything we tried aggravated the pain. The chorus of I-told-you-so’s began to swell, too. It seemed like everyone who didn’t run had an opinion on running and getting older.

*This is what happens when we age, Melinda. You’ll have to learn to slow down. I’ll bet with all that running you’ve done, you have arthritis. My friend Charles had to have a knee replacement last year, and he was only forty-five. With all that running you’ve done, you’ve probably torn the meniscus. You’ll need surgery.* (Thank you for that last diagnosis, my schoolteacher friend.)

What I needed surgery on was my fears. What if they were right? Perhaps I had reached my physical limit, had run my last mile. Maybe this was just me getting old and decrepit.

I suffered for months, even as I visualized health, headed out for a run-walk, and limped back home. *Do I give up?* I wondered if I had waited long enough for it to heal, or if I should give it more time. On top of that, the more my knee hurt, the more wrinkles I saw in my face. Who knew those body parts were connected?

### **I Want to Be That Person**

When my nephew, Brandon, ran the Louisiana Marathon for the first time in 2015, I decided to meet him at the finish line. He had consistently trained as a runner for a couple of years, gradually working up from 5K to 10K races, then to a half-marathon, and finally, a full marathon of 26.2 miles. I wanted to support him and celebrate his having reached such a big milestone.

As I parked, I was surprised at how big the crowd was. My knee was still in pain, but I ran the couple of blocks from my parking spot to where the race ended, making my way in a limping run-walk, envious of the runners with racing bibs that proclaimed them as participants.

The finish line for this race was a big deal, with loud music, a giant inflated finish-line structure, and a grandstand. Flags lined the street and whipped in the wind as if applauding the runners as they passed. A big digital clock with each runner's race time counted the minutes and seconds, and I knew that the first marathon runners would be coming in soon. The street was blocked off with guardrails to give the runners plenty of space to keep going past the grandstand and get out of the way of other participants as they crossed the line. The emcee kept the crowd going as the first runners came in, and I was surprised to hear that he announced each runner's name and age as they crossed the line.

The half-marathoners were trickling in as well, and two runners caught my attention: a husband and wife, both in their mid-sixties, smiling and holding hands as they finished together. My knee ached, and my heart did a little, too. I couldn't imagine running 13.1 miles, not with this knee situation. I wondered how they did it, if it was even possible for me, and if I wanted to spend the time, effort, and miles to condition myself.

As I walked with my nephew toward the physical therapy tent to get his legs stretched out, I felt like an outsider amid all the tired athletes. I didn't like the feeling, and I was discouraged that I couldn't see any way of joining this group with my knee injury. Would I ever be able to? I comforted myself with a silly thought: *Maybe I just have a case of the "kneesles," and this too shall pass.*

Later, as I limped back to my car, I couldn't get the thought of the sixty-year-old woman runner out of my mind. I observed, in myself and others, that letting our world shrink as we collect years was all too easy, that we gradually stop doing the things we could always do before. I knew that living out the story I had about myself—that I was too old or tired or whatever to “do that”—would lead me to choices that made sure “that” would never happen. On the other hand, telling myself that I was able to run a half-marathon brought up doubts. Was I lying to myself? Living in a fantasy?

Our culture is infused with messages that tell us to take care of ourselves as we age by doing less. One of the most challenging visualizations for me was to imagine myself doing something that didn't seem possible, to ignore current circumstances and “proof” that I couldn't do them. However, a directive deep inside me drove me to challenge my limitations, to find out whether they were self-imposed or physically grounded. I knew that my aging body would gradually eliminate some options all by itself, but I didn't have to help it along.

It was time to face the fact that my knee wasn't going to heal on its own. I had to find out if I needed surgery.

### **The Ortho and the MRI**

I braced myself for the visit to the orthopedist, who would ostensibly render judgment on what was wrong with my knee. He was a kind man whose own torn meniscus had ended his running career. I kept that in mind as he gently manipulated my swollen knee. I wondered if his personal history meant he would lean toward surgery for me. I was watchful.

“We have a choice,” he said. “We can just watch it a bit more or get an MRI and see what’s going on. That can tell us what to do next.” This made sense to me, so two days later I was meditating in the MRI room while the magic of a powerful magnetic field and an electric current pulsing through my body opened a window into the structure of my knee. I could sense that I was at a psychic intersection, with one path leading to surgery and the curtailing of my activities, and the other, a miracle that nothing was actually wrong. I could feel the expectations of the medical community press in on me, trying to take the oxygen out of my lungs and the hope out of my heart—not intentionally, of course; it was just the paradigm they lived in. There wasn’t much talk of how the mind influences the body, but I knew it did, so I harnessed that power with every bit of energy I could muster.

The struggle with my knee brought to the surface subterranean fears of getting older and becoming less physically capable. I wondered where the line was between what I *thought* I could do and what I could *actually* do. I knew that my body was less flexible than it used to be because of my attempts at twisting asanas in my yoga practice, but that could be attributed to lack of recent practice instead of a true lack of range of motion. These questions wandered into my mind demanding attention, but the answers were not easily located.

The day before I was scheduled to get the MRI results, I declared to no one in particular that the MRI was going to show that nothing was wrong. I imagined the doctor saying in a puzzled voice, “This shows no evidence of a torn meniscus.” Just like Schrodinger’s cat, who was both alive and dead inside a box until the box was opened, my meniscus was both torn and whole until we actually looked at the MRI results. Both options existed as a possibility, so I decided to choose which one I wanted to experience. The answer was clear.

I asked my husband to come with me to the appointment. I wanted a witness. I was nervous as the orthopedist brought up the images of the MRI on the computer screen. He put on his reading glasses, leaned closer, and peered at the screen. He pointed with a pencil to the white line that was my meniscus. “Hmm,” he murmured. “There’s definitely something, but I can’t see a tear.” I perked up. He pulled up the radiologist report and translated the medical language. “The radiologist doesn’t see one either. I’m not sure what’s going on. Just take it easy, and see what happens.”

I exhaled. The scene played out just as I had imagined it, and I mentally skipped out of the office. My knee was still tender, but I was going to fix it. Somehow.



Hello friend! Thanks for reading so far—I hope you liked it! Watch for the upcoming release of *Outrunning Age: Meeting Midlife With Courage, Compassion, and a Few Blisters*. It’s currently on the calendar for release late 2022 or early 2023. If you haven’t already joined the [Outrunning Age Facebook group](#), I’d love for you to be a part of our community!



**Melinda Walsh** is a relentlessly creative award-winning communicator whose experience both in front of and behind the camera has made her an expert in the intentional use of story to make transformational shifts.

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