

BORDER INCIDENT

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A dry, desolate day had established itself in the San Rafael Valley, 50 miles south east of Tucson along the Mexican border. Though seemingly deserted, there were many occupants about, both seen and unseen. Most obvious, by design, were the Border Patrol

vehicles. Laying low were the latest influx of undocumented migrants and narcos waiting for the shadows to stretch into darkness to move northward. Hovering above all were circling bands of Turkey Vultures. Driving through this sink trap of human experience were myself, my wife and son.

Three days earlier and 1,800 miles away, I had just completed a cold stiff run around Lake Union in Seattle. Little did I know that I was to collide with the fickle finger of fate along a grubby dirt road in the desert and that running in the sleet in the Northwest was a blessing in disguise.

Traveling through the sharp hills and grassland flats of the San Rafael had been a sublime, somewhat eerie experience. This was a no-man's land at once owned by local ranchers and the Forest Service, but really a focal point for illegal immigration, drug smuggling and an edgy atmosphere.

We lingered by Fray Marcos de Niza Historical Monument, the first place a man of European decent placed a foot on American soil west of the Rockies. Further on was the desperate village of Lochiel, with one foot of its own on both sides of the border and a weather beaten sign in between warning 'beware of smugglers'.

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We passed these by, and we too, started working our way northward. Before long we turned a corner and happened upon a classic rural southwestern cemetery. Old tomb stones, plastic flowers, and other memorabilia celebrating the Mexican relationship with death decorated the stream side graveyard. Anchoring the stream bed was a grove of ancient Sycamores, with thick, almost horizontal trunks. We pulled over to explore a bit.

On a whim, I decided to climb one of the trees for a better look and to stretch the legs. I clambered upward a few feet only to slide backwards with my ankles exposed. I collided with a protruding rock at the base of the tree and instantly my life changed.

As soon as I hit bottom, I knew I had done something profoundly stupid. I felt for the tendon that connects the back of the foot to the lower leg and it was pure mush. In the physically disabled community, people without mobility restrictions are derisively known as 'TABS' – temporarily able-bodied. I knew instantly that I had left the ranks of the TABs.

I hopped about like a hamstrung rabbit for a minute, expressed a few invectives, and then flopped into the car for a depressing trip to an Urgent Care Center in Tucson.

Along the way, I couldn't help but ruminate about my frigid and sloppy runs around Seattle. What seemed like drudgery at the time began to take on the halo effect of experiences gone unappreciated. Distance running, back country work for the Forest Service and the blithe assumption of unlimited mobility came to a screeching halt upon the proclamation of a severed Achilles tendon by a Sports Medicine doc the next day. My prognosis was for eight weeks in a cast, two months of physical therapy and four to six

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months before things were back to normal, if ever. The rupture was so clean and well done that there was little residual pain and no chance for deep sympathy from anyone.

The point of all of this was not lost on me. I'd be leading life for a good while from a sitting position or on crutches and this is no bargain. I'd become an observer where even the gecko on the wall outside my window had more freedom than me.

I had always thought that any significant injury I might suffer would be running-related, but Kismet surfaced and delivered a different message. Assume nothing. It can all change in a blink.

I do have prospects. I will walk again which is a blessing others will never enjoy. The simple act of taking that first step or that first stride is not something I expect to ever take for granted again. Seattle's sodden running routes seem pretty magical now.