

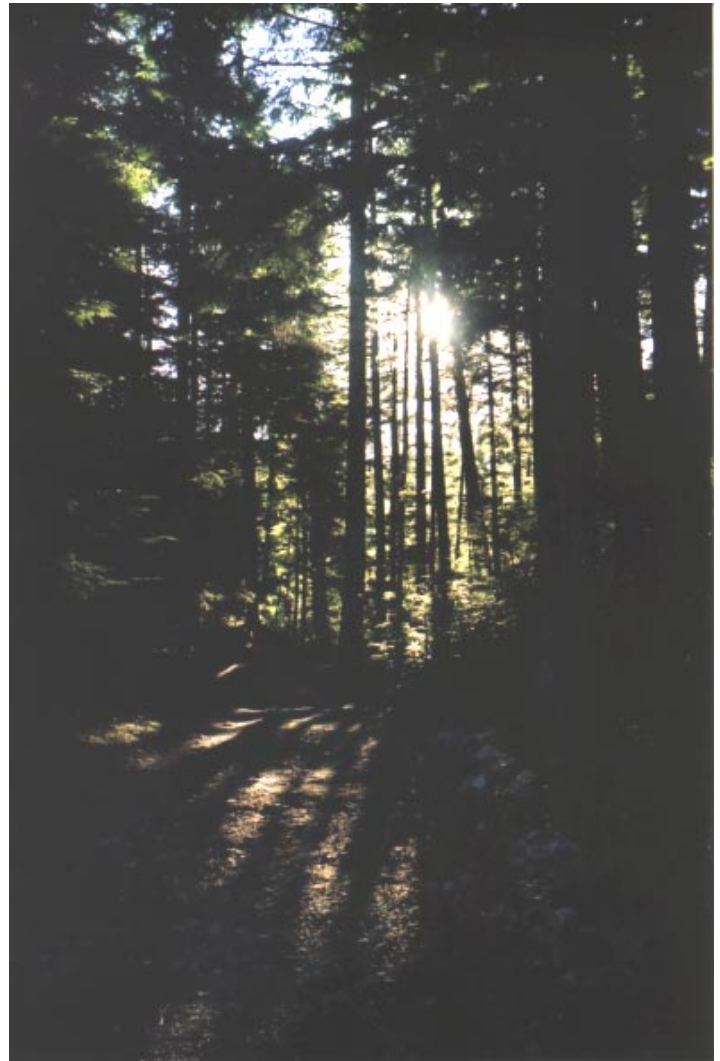
Running the Houston Trail

by Sharon Twiss

I arrive at the Houston Trail to be greeted by a sign that says, “Bears spotted in this area. Keep your dog leashed until further notice.” Dogs should be leashed in this part of the park anyway. I clip my keys to my shoes with a silent prayer that their jangling will keep the bears away.

With the cooperation of the downhill slope, I start running. Running stiffly because I’m too impatient to warm up; soon my breath is ragged. Up and down short intense hills, turning here and there. Is this the worst part of the trail, or is it that I truly detest running for the first fifteen minutes? I live in a society where I have to drive somewhere to exercise. I sit all day, and then run around the four kilometre circle of the Houston Trail. My running, the quick-change trail, my crankiness – I wonder why I’m doing this. I run anyway. I crest the last hill, and then, finally, it’s worth it.

Into the woods. A high canopy of trees, green, the green that makes my heart hum. The first time I came here I sighed and whispered, “cathedral”. This is the best kind of church. The trail is wide, the woods are



patient. I wish I knew the names of these trees, covered with moss, patterns of green and dark. Their leaves and branches shuddering with the breeze. Cool and hushed, peaceful and mossy soft, my mind begins to loosen its tangles, my breath responds and evens out.

There’s always someone on this trail. These people I’ll pass by, maybe twice if we’re both going around. “Good morning,” they nod in greeting. What is the etiquette of the Houston Trail? No one expects much from a runner, I hope, but I have to at least say, “good morning” back. If I don’t have the breath for that, I should be walking. And I have to pay attention to what they look like, so the next time I see them, halfway around the loop, I can say, “Good morning.

Again.” Without that “again,” it would negate the first salutation. It’s very complicated. Okay, there’s Big Coat walking with Grey Hair, and, oh, this’ll be easy, four chattering Save-On cashiers doing their Sun Run training.

Out of this cathedral and into the sun. I wake up in the light and run a bit faster because it’s bright and it’s flat. And then into the woods again. These are closer. Thicker trees line the trail’s edges. Stumps of old trees with new life and dead branches. And still green. I hum. And I spot a dragon in the woods. Just sitting there quietly. I’m surprised that I’m not scared. It’s not a big one anyway. It takes awhile for this dragon to turn back into bark and moss and branches. Sometimes it’s giant squirrels, or little elves – quite a variety of fauna on this trail tricking my mind.

My jangling alerts a dog owner on the trail. She calls her dog to her side, and they both stop until I pass them. She looks at me intently, searching my face for secret clues. “Good dog,” I hear behind me. Is she worried about him running off? Shouldn’t be off their leash in this part of the park. Later on, there’s more dog people. They too call their dogs to their sides, and check me out. Maybe they’re trying to discover how I feel about people “breaking the rules,” and how I feel about dogs. Now, I smile big as soon as I see a dog off their leash. I feel like I’m practicing a new language with my smile, trying to say, “relax, enjoy your time on the trail.”

I run out of the woods and up a steep hill, steep enough to work hard but so short that I don’t get taxed until I’m strides away from topping it. And then around a bend and run down, down much longer than I came up. The breath after I recover, I’m faced with the challenge of the trail, a hill steeper than stairs and three times longer. Once I ran it all the way.

Afterwards, my heart was pumping so loudly, so strongly, and so outside my body, that I promised my dear heart I would listen. I walk this hill now.

And so I notice the rocks that this trail is paved with. I’ll be thinking about something or someone, and there on the ground is a rock that to me seems to match my thoughts perfectly. I pick it up, and curl its coolness in my hand. By the end of my run, it will be warm and I’ll toss it in my car. When the passenger side floor is littered with rocks, I gather them up and pile them in my room. They make good bookends when they’re in a basket. All those thoughts.

I start my run again, but this time it’s easier, warmer. The trail is smooth, and so is my breath. My thoughts tied with thin threads. I can see a farm for sale . . . Old barns all die the same way. Their roofs cave in the middle, their walls like legs chopped off . . . Leggings. If someone’s wearing leggings, they’re here for fitness . . . A dog runner with the leash tied around her waist. I tie my sweatshirt around my waist – I never know what to wear . . . I hold onto my rock and I continue to run, while my thoughts change with the scenery.

Out of the woods and towards another hill. Not as steep, but still a challenge. I let this hill be my *I Ching*, my seer. Send me coded messages about how my day has been, how that weaves into this moment, and how their pattern becomes the future. A snaggle of yarn some days, on others a bliss-coloured scarf. It doesn’t matter – neither is for keeps.

The parking lot comes into view. As I get closer, the demands of the day begin their encroachment. The memory of this brief holiday and knowing that I’ll soon return comfort me. I still have my rock, but I’ve forgotten its matching thought already.
