Lisa Fay Coutley

Why to Run Racks

Maybe I shouldn't begin by saying once we die, we can make it rain. Or that I wasn't afraid when a storm knocked the power out and the cat dropped a live mouse at my bare feet while I was peeing before bed the night my sister called and woke me at 4:53 a.m. to tell me that Dad, like Mom, had died in a bathroom. Seven-year-old me might always be sitting upright in a sudsless tub sucking a Fudgsicle and waiting for our sharp rotary phone to set in motion Mom's knees booming to the floor as she pleads, *Oh Jesus, Jesus No*, because Grandpa Rueben had gone too soon to make it rain. The essay always wants to start with her—the girl who knew she'd never again see the mom who'd lose herself to loss—yet the woman looking now so lost through so much loss can only know that every seemingly uncertain beginning is groping toward the same quiet end.

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When I bend over the felt, my chin nearly touching my cue, there's never any question where to start or where to go. Catch the edge of the corner ball so it hits the rail and comes back directly to the pocket beneath me. Don't scratch. Knock one other ball loose. Maintain the integrity of the rack knowing the challenge is to consider the next shot while not letting that thought ruin the present moment(um). Of course, I'm thinking none of this as I shoot. I move around the table the same way I walk and talk—fast, exact. I feel my next shot without studying the constellation of balls. I feel where to hit the cue ball to draw it, stop it, or smack the rack. I rarely miss a side-pocket shot. None of this means I know shit about real billiards or have ever learned its principles and techniques. I shoot straight pool by myself to silence every noisy room I'm dragging with me.

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This morning—two shopping days left before my first Christmas without parents or sons or blood or love within 1,500 miles—rain from a sky too

gray to be sky. By noon, snow-covered mountains as backdrop to birds pecking the mangled tree with bark whipping in long strips like ragged flags in the center of my new yard. I've come to love the duality of weather at elevation—walking the dog in drizzle while snow blankets the crags, hemmed in by mountains impassable yet fragile, within sight of winter but beyond its reach. It's the best way to endure a harsh season, I remember telling my dad. How could I say it was little different than the way I'd learned to prefer distance and solitude to the drama and trauma of family gatherings? The miles made it possible for me to appreciate home, yet each year away meant moving further from my sense of origin and of myself as his familiar little girl.

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Running racks is, for me, the meditative act of sinking ball after ball without interruption to my rhythm while challenging no one but myself, which is something that seems to confound most men. Without fail, every time I shoot (often mid-shot), some guy strolls over to comment on my shooting or to ask if I'd *like a game*, as if I couldn't have found someone to tag along if a partner were what I had truly desired most of all. *You're good, but I'm better—wanna play? I sure do like watching you shoot. Hey, you're a good little player*. *Shark!* I've heard it all, been invited to hustle with men who can calculate every angle but have no heart, and while I'm never surprised to be the only woman in the hall I'm forever flabbergasted that so few shooters can grasp why I'd never play for money or why I prefer to shoot alone or why I couldn't care less about winning or losing to anyone but myself.

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After fifty years of three packs (and a six-pack-plus of Pabst) per day, Dad was hypnotized and never smoked again during the six months before lung cancer killed him. Mom had sat vigil over her bottle of vodka so long her leg muscles atrophied till she couldn't walk. She aspirated (breathed her own bile) next to a toilet at age fifty-two. I can't remember how, being right-handed, I became a southpaw shot before I was tall enough to play without a stool in my parents' basement. I can't remember Dad showing me how to hold a cue, but I know the first time I guzzled a can of Budweiser I picked it up from the side rail of said table. I was nine. After six beers I puked six times and passed out in my bed tent surrounded by Pound Puppies. I was nine the first time I smoked a cigarette, ten when I

stole and smoked some of Mom's dope, and fifteen the first time I got stoned with Dad. This has nothing and everything to do with the essay.

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I suppose every serious shooter wants a true cue and a table as close to flawless as possible, though I'd argue, as it is with learning the body of a new lover, part of the pleasure of playing a favorite table is identifying its weak spots and learning to shoot around, in spite of, or (better yet) into them. My favorite eight feet of slate stands at Fat's in Salt Lake City between a table with a slight roll that I don't want to learn and another that's too close to the bathroom. Mine is in the middle, and although the pockets need repairing, so that every time I make a side shot my ball falls to the floor and hitches my rhythm, I get anxious every time I pull into the parking lot and consider that some other schmuck might be on *my* table, which is little different from someone strumming another musician's guitar or another writer sitting down to plunk away at my laptop at my desk.

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Mom once told me that while she was pregnant with me my dad tried to drown her in our bathtub. Us, she said—*he tried to kill* us. *It never happened*, Dad told me when I asked years later. *Make no mistake*, he said, *I wanted to kill her, but not like that.* He went on to tell me about a plan he and his brother had hatched to kill their wives where they'd often drink in Mom's car parked at the yacht club across from the Pulliam Plant that spread its arcade of smokestack lights across the Fox River. I imagine Mom and Aunt Kathy parked there, sharing a joint and bitching about being housewives to Vietnam vets who beat them—two uneducated women without a better outlet for their desires, who went from their fathers' houses to their husbands', and who never could distance themselves from the storm and instead just continued changing the weather inside their only commodities, their bodies.

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Dad thought it was *neat* that I love to shoot pool. I suppose in some ways, as a Midwestern, blue-collar journeyman, he was pleased to picture his tiny, female daughter playing men who never expected to have their asses handed to them. He loved an underdog story, and winning was crucial, especially for his girl playing a man's sport. He also understood my need to play alone in the same way he knew my love of lakes and poetry, having

instilled in me a need for music since I was a small girl in charge of resting the needle without a scratch and later when called upon to analyze the lyrics of every sad or political song he'd play ad nauseam. Such is the confounding, paradoxical nature of a man who would cry retelling his case of typhoid fever with its endless shots in the ass and months of quarantine and then knock down the biggest guy in the bar in front of his five-year-old daughter.

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My parents stopped hating each other under the same roof the same year I slammed my first beer and smoked my first cig. For years I struggled with some form of habit—smoking, drinking, falling for bad men—and it's taken years to be able to say it out loud. In many ways, having distance from the storm is more troubling than the rush of standing in the eye and watching chaos whirl all around me. To be outside of the family squall means quiet (no fighting, no crying), but in truth, the lullaby's a muted wish. Staring myself square in the face and not liking all that I see—yet not smoking or drinking or feigning love or otherwise drowning me out—is fucking terrifying. It took me twenty-seven years to quit smoking—once I realized I was just lonely, and a cigarette was the one friend that never let me down. A year later, I'm still on the prowl for any upset, any reason to fail myself and start again.

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I know there is nothing special about my story—nothing extraordinary about a girl who was raised in a volatile home and spent most of her time at the shore's edge behind her house because only in the water's push and pull did she find stillness inside herself; who was eight when she bound her first book and told her mother she would be an author and then promptly forgot herself until she was a young, troubled mother of two, writing by dim light while everyone slept in an attempt to save her own life; who would eventually return to school—much to the amusement of her father who had watched her squander four years of high school—where she would fall in love with words and herself and a man who'd remind her of her need for pool; who would eventually relinquish the man but revel in the game that moves in her and saves her as does water and language and love.

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The morning Dad died was really the night (gauged by the darkness). I can't say whether I made my mocha by artificial light, changed out of my

robe, or heard what my friend was saying when I turned the corner on the deck to find the sun jackknifing over the mountains. I'm neither superstitious nor religious. I am happy to be stardust, and I've always known in my gut that death is nothing to fear. Watching others go before me and not getting mired in loss—that's the hard part. Losing the last human who knew me in every moment of myself—that felt significant. I was just another sad woman turning another sad corner, and I hit a wall of rain. Everywhere, tinsel. Halfway to the deck's end, the straightest rain fell silent and steady and slow between me and the mountains drenched in sun—silver so still in its movement for one, long moment—never shifting, falling only in half of the yard. Then, it was gone.

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Maybe I'm wrong about distance. Maybe (thankfully) the essay can never know its own start or end. Yet I refuse to wait until I'm dead to make it rain. I refuse to need to control the weather inside me. I refuse to pretend that I can embrace the mountains' heft all harsh season long, the heart in the grip of some force I can neither stop nor love enough, but I have found my ways to dance no matter what this valley delivers. Some people do yoga. Others meditate. Many medicate. I've tried them all. Even on a bad sciatica day, I prefer to bend myself level with the felt and aim without thinking *aim*, without gripping the cue too tight, without jabbing at the ball as if I'm as angry as my fear thinks it has a right to be. To follow through smooth means to trust my hands and my eyes and to forget that I exist. It means quiet, despite the storm that I'm in or the storm that I am.