

# *It's not easy, is it?*

Last night my uncle lay  
In the universal posture of deprecation  
Flat on his back, limbs in the air  
The putative unit of intensive care

Though what, in that room, was intense, what cared  
Was not precisely clear  
Unless it was his hope, or his despair  
My hand on his shoulder, my attentive ear

Though outside the sun, I knew, was setting over Central Park  
A cricketless torpor as of tropic noon  
Had engulfed the room;  
And when his eyes closed I inventoried

Letting my eyes scan monitors, count breaths  
But discovered nothing I had not been told  
Just fever, tachypnea, pallor, fear  
I have attended half a hundred deaths

My mother's younger brother began shy and hesitant  
Betrayed by stutter  
So learned early to turn things to account, to keep book  
Learned to craft his every ledger  
With a weather eye upon the long haul  
And, recognizing that his body was his major account  
He deposited in it years of grueling training in all weathers  
Became for me a symbol of the will to health  
Something banked to draw upon  
But when I told him last night, that inspired by his example  
I had, in January, bought a NordicTrack  
And for 25 minutes each morning  
Skied on it alone in my basement  
He brightened for the only time during my visit and  
Said, "It's not easy, is it?"

This morning, the visit to my parents having severed me from  
my machine  
(While he, still attached to his  
IV's, arterial line, oxygen mask and meter  
Cooling blanket, and catheter

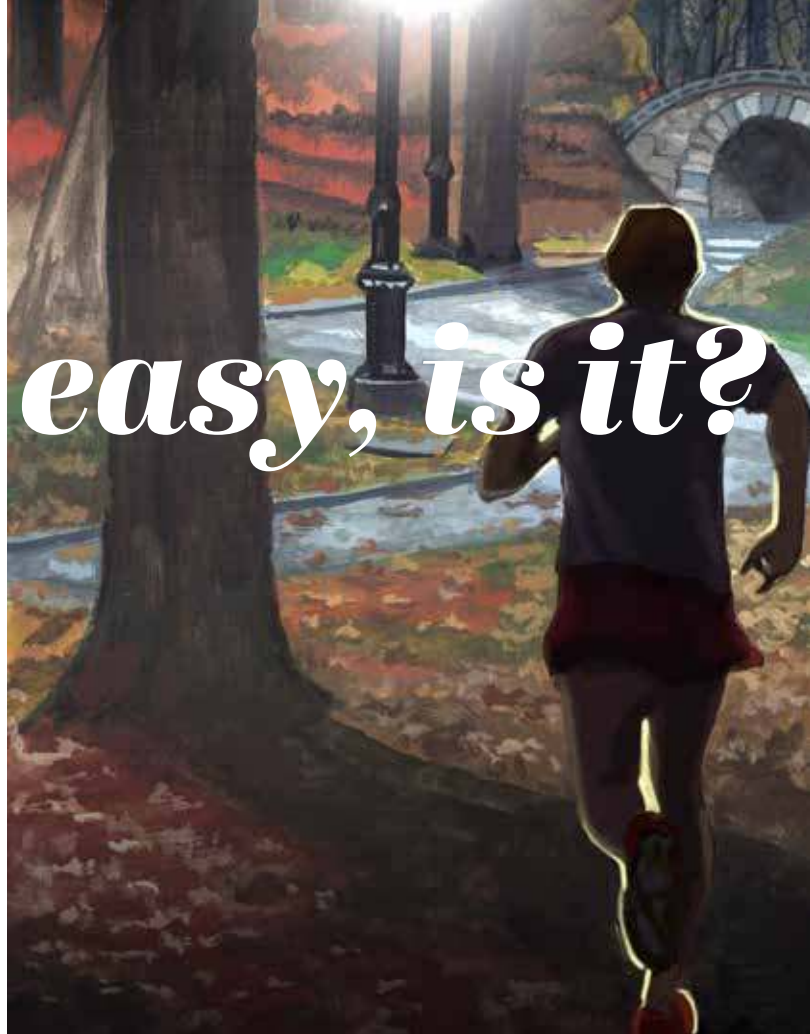


Illustration by Steve Derrick

Lies undiagnosed and failing in an unfamiliar bed)  
I go out into the vacillating real day to run  
Overnight the temperature has fallen  
90s to 40s (his still up, despite the blanket)  
And my legs, pumping, absorb  
The unfamiliar punishment of cinder and macadam  
I run back past high school to elementary  
Run, again a child with my first dog, along the stream  
Nephew to a green and growing man

What shield, what weapon does a man  
Who has spent his life in vigorous bodily confrontation  
with decay  
Choose, lying in bed, too weak to sit upright without support  
To ward off, to spar with disease  
I want to tell him "Do not despair  
I have attended several thousand that have cheated death,"  
But he knows accounts  
That statistics have no bearing on the single case  
Waits patient, disabled, a reluctant spectator  
For the issue of the struggle being waged  
Unequally between his doctors and disease  
For his health, his life  
It's not easy, is it?

—Alan Cohen, MD