

RUNNER

HAWK

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## *One*

**I**t was right in a moment of stillness as the cold morning air bit at my breath that I first caught sight of the runner. He hung there in mid-stride, strange and unnatural in his frozen form. That morning I'd felt separated from everything that was going on around me. Standing still in that frost-covered field, I felt as if I'd been moving ahead of myself, as if part of me had been left behind while another part was beyond the *now* and the *past*, pushing into a future that wasn't mine. And I didn't care. I'd run out of time, but I didn't care.

There he was. His paused state taunting a snow-bound world. He wasn't possible but he was there. And looking at him, I had this feeling that I too was beyond time. Who I was seemed uncertain and unstable. I wasn't Leo Roslin watching a man who should have been way out of sight by now. Gone. I was without a name or a place. I was as

impossible as that runner. My hand felt like a hand, but not my hand, not something intimately connected to me. Nothing was mine anymore. I called out. My voice was like an echo falling through a cave into a deep, too-complete silence, not like a voice at all. I couldn't have spoken. I hadn't reached out to touch the quiet and fill it with sound. I wasn't part of the same pulse that flowed through everyone else. Perhaps I never had been. I saw the runner, but I couldn't understand how he was possible and the more I looked at him, the more I felt like I was just the same as him. He'd run out of time, and now he was just stuck there. A ghost in the air.

Nothing that morning had been normal. For a start, I'd been running and that wasn't like me at all. I'm not someone who gets up at six in the freezing depths of winter and runs over fields for fun. I was running to get away from what my dad called my bone idleness. Get up, he kept telling me, do something with your life. I knew what he meant. He meant, Leo, you're seventeen, you need to find what it is you want to be. The looks of disappointment, the comments about what time I was getting up again, what time I was going to bed, was I even going to bed, the talk at dinner about his colleagues at work whose sons were off to university in the summer or had bagged some big-deal internship in London.

I couldn't give him what he wanted because the truth was, I had no idea how to do that. Everything felt like a dead end. Even when I tried to think about my future, about what I wanted, there was just this hollow space, that silence in the cave but this time without even an echo to pretend there hadn't always just been silence.

I think I ran because I wanted them to see me doing the one thing they wouldn't expect me to do. See that I wasn't inert. When I got up, Dad had been packing the car. They were going to Bermuda for Christmas because Dad's boss had offices out there. Not all work, but not completely a holiday either. We'd argued the day before. Dad shouting like he always seemed to shout when I couldn't give him the answer he wanted. I couldn't just say I know what I want, I can see it, I'll do it. I could only shrug and apologise, but even that seemed to make him hate me a little bit more. I was ungrateful. I was a waste of space. I was taking advantage of them. I was no son of his because a real son of his would have more get up and go. That had made Mum cry and though I'm pretty sure it was Dad's shouting that had upset her, he blamed me for her tears. I was upsetting her. I was letting him down. Did I even realise how lucky I was? It was only when Mum had run upstairs, shouting how could I know how lucky I was, that Dad stopped. There was

this ugly quiet then in the dining room. It was heavy and suffocating. We sat there, finished our tea and then I got up and went to bed. I heard Mum crying from her room, but I didn't go to her. I slept. I did what they were accusing of me of doing. Nothing.

When I ran past Dad that cold morning as he packed the car with their suitcases, I didn't say anything. There was distance between us and I don't think either of us wanted to shorten that distance yet. He saw me and I saw his back straighten from the car boot, so I ran faster up our street and out of the village, away from him.

I only slowed down to a jog when I was out of Dad's sight. I ran up past The George and Dragon and then down past the church onto the footpath to Westage Lane. There was no one else around because it was so early on a Monday and so cold. I slipped a few times on the path but got my balance soon enough, found an unsteady rhythm on the potholed lane, and eventually I turned off Westage Lane and walked down Hield Lane to where it hit Dark Lane. There was another path there through some fields that led to the lake at Pick Mere. I think I'd half-decided to run as far as the lake though I never got there.

The air felt sharp as I breathed in. I stopped at the gate that led into the field and breathed in the air. Little ice

knives stabbed into my lungs. A car whizzed past, too fast probably with the way the ice lay thick on the ungritted road. I dipped my chin into the collar of my jacket, so it covered my mouth, and pushed through the gate. There was a trickle stream frozen solid, and all the grass was white. My chest was burning though I'd hardly run. I walked on a little across the field. I felt that satisfying shattering of frozen grass beneath my boots. Every now and again I stopped, stamped my feet to break the ice and then stepped back, looked at the result of my stamping, dipped my toe against the ice and pushed it down so the black water beneath came up.

I hadn't been walking long when I saw the runner. Pick Mere was still a way off, but my chest was aching from the run. Dad was probably right, I was a layabout, because I was out of breath, and I'd hardly been running for long. I was half considering turning around, not bothering with carrying on to the mere, when I saw him.

The field rose a little and there he was on its crest. At first, I thought he was stretching or just taking a breath. It was a cold day after all, my own chest was still burning even though I was no longer running. I stopped and watched him. He wasn't exactly equipped for the conditions either. He was wearing a shiny green tracksuit, like the kind people wore in the eighties. It had a blue stripe down each arm and each leg.

He didn't have a hat on to fight off the cold or any gloves for that matter. That was strange but then I'd seen runners round here in the depths of winter in vests and shorts. Then I noticed how his body was held, one leg back and lifted from the ground, one arm forward stretching out, one arm back. The morning sun was glaring down, so I brought my hand up to shield my eyes. I could see he wasn't moving. He was running but it was almost as if he had been frozen in the act of running, mid-stride, mid-jog. I kept watching him, expecting him to suddenly run, as if this were a kind of joke he was pulling on someone who might be watching him, on me. It was as I watched him, so unmoving and unreal, that I began to feel myself pulling away, separating from the world, being stretched out of belonging into isolation. I was as numb as he was. As disconnected from the world. I stared at him and the more I stared, the more I forgot who I was, why I was. I don't know how long I stood there for, but he didn't move once in all that time. Frozen, though surely the day wasn't that cold, and surely if he was frozen, he would have toppled, fallen to the grass.

Like a string had suddenly snapped I felt my body shudder, as if it had only just remembered how cold the day was, remembered to feel something. I shoved my hands in my pockets. Standing in one place had made me feel the



cold more. I shivered, jumped up and down. Still, he didn't move an inch. I kept watching him, suddenly entranced again. I knew I was standing just as still as he was. I knew that time was moving and that nothing was changing, but I stayed there, watching him. And within that stillness, so complete and unnatural, I felt separation, as if part of me had stretched far beyond my standing place and was gone.

I almost called to him. I had no idea what I would have called. *Hello there? Are you okay? Hey, mate, what's wrong with you?* But I didn't say anything in the end. Eventually, I pulled my hands from my pockets and made myself turn away. I walked back towards Dark Lane trying to forget about him. Whoever he was, it was obvious he wasn't right, that there was something strange about him, but I didn't want to think about him too much, because if I started on that, really thinking about what I'd just seen, I'd be forced to admit I'd seen something impossible and inevitably I'd try to make sense of that, make it possible.

As I walked along Dark Lane and onto Hield Lane then down the path and back into Great Budworth, I locked him away in a part of my brain where he could be forgotten. As I walked, I started to feel separated from everything around me again. I wasn't running. I don't think I could have. My body felt heavy, reluctant. Slow-stepping, too

aware of the icy pavement, I was moving almost like a robot, my movements not my own. My hands were cold, numb. I couldn't hear a sound in the world. Even when a car passed me, I didn't hear a thing. I was only conscious of the car's shape passing me, moving beyond me. It could have taken me a few minutes to get back into the village or it could have taken me a year. I couldn't tell the difference. It was only as I came down towards the church and heard the girl singing that I was brought back into myself. That separation, that disconnect the runner had initiated, vanished as soon as I heard her voice. I heard an engine start in the pub car park. Birds called at the slow-waking morning. My phone buzzed in my pocket. I heard the girl sing.