



THE RUNNER

Book four in the celebrated Tillerman Cycle

CYNTHIA VOIGT

THE RUNNER

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ATHENEUM BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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About Cynthia Voigt

WITH
MANY THANKS,
TO MY MOTHER
&
FATHER

Runners
and track fans
will undoubtedly notice
that I have taken liberties
with the order of the sports year.
I hope they will, despite
this, permit me
the story.

1967

The time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the marketplace.
Man and boys stood cheering by
As home we brought you, shoulder
high.

CHAPTER 1

Bullet was angry. He crashed his supper plate and milk glass down beside the sink and walked out of the kitchen.

Where did the old man think he got off?

On the back porch he pulled off the oxford shirt and khakis he'd put on for dinner, stripping down to the shorts and T-shirt he wore underneath. He was angry, good and angry. He was mad, good and mad. Bad and mad, bad mad . . . His feet picked up the rhythm of his anger.

He pounded down the path through the vegetable garden, heading for the water. He was PO'd, pissed off, he was royally pissed off, and he didn't care what they thought. He didn't give a royal fart for the two of them sitting at that table back in the kitchen. Bullet made his hands into fists, brought his knees up high and stomped his feet into the dirt of the path. The way the old man talked to him, it made him mad.

Where did he think he got off talking to him like that—as if he still thought he could make Bullet do anything. The guy was book smart but life stupid, trying to box Bullet in with—*A* if he could make him do anything.

If it came to a fight he knew he could whip the old man with one hand, with no hands the way he felt now, just hitting at the old guy with his head and kicking—and his teeth too. Bullet was seventeen, even if he didn't have the license to prove it, because he wasn't allowed to get a license; seventeen and he'd wear his hair any damned way he wanted to. Angry enough to rip tendons out of the old man's arms with his teeth if all of his other weapons were lost. And he could do it too. Only he couldn't, because there never was a real fight between them. Just these petty boxing-in orders. Well, he picked and chose what orders he'd follow, he'd learned a while back how to do that. It wasn't easy, that learning, but nobody saying growing up wasn't going to hurt.

He came to the dock and stopped. His chest was heaving: he'd taken the quarter mile at full run and that was stupid. Bad enough that he had to do his running on a full stomach—because his father wanted dinner at 5:30 exactly, and everybody he was feeding at the table had to eat. Bullet couldn't do anything about that, but he knew better than to start out at full force. You were supposed to loosen up slowly, and now he'd have to rest before he started his evening run. This was his third year running cross-country, he shouldn't be making that kind of mistake. He stood at the end of the dock, listening to his heartbeat slow, letting his muscles ease down.

He was looking out over the water, but he felt the land stretching away behind him, flat fertile fields marked off by tall, straggly loblollies and little stands of pines. The broad belt of marsh grass whispered under the wind, behind him, beside him. Through the soles of his

sneakers he could feel the land, firm and deep, beneath him.

“Get your hair cut. You look effeminate,” his father had said, his voice dry as harvested hay.

Bullet had just looked at him, but the old guy never looked at you, never looked you in the eye. Mostly, Bullet didn’t answer his father. *I don’t have to listen to this*, he said inside his head at his father’s face. *As long as I do my work, that’s what you’re entitled to and I work my tail off.*

“Effeminate means girlish,” the sarcastic voice had said, as if Bullet didn’t know that. The cold eyes had gone down to the other end of the table, where Bullet’s mother sat. She didn’t say anything, she never would anymore. The old man wanted to run things, and he wanted you to say something so he could knock you down with his answer and box you in tighter. If she said something, it wasn’t her he’d try to knock down, it was Bullet, just the way he had with Johnny first, then with Liza. Driving them away, to drive them away. Bullet’s mother sat there, her eyes dark and angry, her mouth still as stone.

Bullet had hooked his hair behind his ear and kept on eating.

“I want that hair cut tomorrow.” His father gave the order.

If wishes were horses, Bullet answered inside his head with the old nursery rhyme, *beggar would ride*. The thought struck him as funny.

“Or I’ll take the scissors to you myself.”

No.

* * *

There was a wind blowing up from the south, blowing in thick, heavy air. Bullet didn’t mind that. He never minded weather, even when the muggy summer air hung so close and humid you couldn’t sweat into it. His eyes drifted out to the end of the dock—Johnny’s boat was still there, still afloat. He wondered how many years it would be before the wood gave out to the weather and the thing just sank. His mother was the only one who ever took it out, and she bailed it too and scraped as much of the bottom as she could get to standing beside it in the shallow water. But she couldn’t get it out of the water for the winter, didn’t have time to caulk and paint the hull, never had any money, so she couldn’t have it hauled at one of the boatyards. Too bad. Too bad the old man wouldn’t let her get a driver’s license either because that meant the only way she could get around on her own was this sailboat. Which would, someday, sooner or later, just rot away.

He turned away from the little waves, blown over the top of the water under a September sky, and let the wind hit his back. He was about ready.

But before he could take off, he heard pattering footsteps and panting behind him, when the path came down to the shore from the marsh grasses. A cold nose touched his calf: “Get lost,” he said without looking. “Get lost, OD.”

The dog ignored the order. She stood wagging her tail, her brown eyes staring up at him, her tongue lolling out of her mouth. He turned around and raised a foot to kick at her. Liza’s old dog—Florabella was what Liza tried to get them to call her. Bullet named her OD, for

Old Dog—and because the dog was an overdose of Liza’s stupid softheartedness. Liza found her one morning, just swimming out in the middle of the bay. Somebody had dumped a little of puppies overboard—without even bothering to weight down the sack, apparently—and this one was just swimming away stupidly, putting off drowning. Liza and Johnny got her into the boat, and Johnny had gotten the old man’s permission for Liza to keep the puppy. That was back in the days before the old man paid much attention to any of them, before Johnny started growing up and getting angry. Bullet couldn’t have been more than four when Liza found OD. OD was really getting to be an old dog, thirteen was pretty old for a dog. She lived in the barn and Liza used to feed her and play with her—he guessed his mother might be feeding OD now, Liza had been gone for a few years. The only thing Liza left behind when she took off with Frank was this dog. Just like leaving something of herself behind, because the dog was about as stupid as Liza was.

When Bullet raised his foot, OD backed off. She crouched low to the ground and waved her tail to appease him, but she kept her stupid brown eyes on his face. He turned full around, raised his arms and roared at her. She backed off, fast, afraid, stopping where the path entered the marsh grass. The grass towered over her. She was no taller than a beagle, even though she was rounder, with long golden hair. He roared again, jumped twice at her King-Kong style, and she fled up the path. He fired off a couple of oyster shells at her rumble to keep her going.

Bullet wouldn’t have minded a good hunting dog, a hound or a bird dog. But the old man would never let him. First it was, “You’re too young to take the responsibility,” then, “You’re too old for pets.” There was never any argument you could have with him. Unless you were Johnny, but if you were Johnny you would have been a carbon copy of the old man and Bullet didn’t want to be that. His old man was a nothing, nothing but right answers and holding on to his precious farm.

Bullet bent down and straightened up, ten slow toe touches, breathing in deep and easing getting his palms flat on the ground. *Hold on*, he said to himself. *Be fair*. The old man was bad enough as he was, there was no need to be unfair. The guy was a crack shot, for one thing. Every year he got his deer, as well as the quota of goose and duck. To watch his father bring down a deer was a treat. The old guy never hesitated, never took more than one shot.

And the old man knew about things, he’d learned a lot and remembered it. Science and mechanics and farming, but also history and what people long dead had said—he could answer just about any question you asked him. If you asked him a question. But he didn’t listen to other answers, and it took Johnny years to figure that out, once Johnny had some answers of his own. Not Bullet, Bullet learned from watching the two of them, learned a lot. Johnny’d try his own answers, and at first the old man scared him and boxed him in with how much more he knew; but as Johnny grew up he got angry instead of scared. Bullet figured it out: little kids you could keep boxed in, so that was okay with the old man; but older kids could fight back and he couldn’t take that. The more Johnny fought back the more his father boxed the rest of them in, and Momma too. Bullet learned that, fast and good, because

nobody—he stood up straight, his arms wide, breathing air deep into his lungs—but nobody was going to get close to boxing him in. Nobody. No way. Not ever. He'd been his own man for years.

Bullet started on the run. Beginning in March, he ran his ten-mile course every evening. Up five miles along the shoreline, back five miles. Rain or sleet made no difference to him. He'd be out there in his shorts, T-shirt and sneakers. Cross-country took that kind of training. Bullet didn't have to train like this to win the races, but that wasn't what he was after, anyway, just winning. He had to train to keep getting better, to be as good as he could. And he was really good.

The course started off along the narrow beach, then cut inland—up over the eroded bank and fallen trees, through undergrowth, then back down to the muddy sand. Sometimes Bullet swerved inland to a field and pelted across it, his footing tested by the furrows with dried cornstalks like giant stubble, every footfall calculated. Sometimes he made short zigzagging spurts, ten yards up a beach, then five at the overgrown land's edge, testing the spring in his legs and his ability to get over obstacles, or through them.

You never knew what kind of land a cross-country course would cover. The disadvantage of training down on the eastern shore was that the land was so flat. The meets up north, or in the western part of the state, could be killers if you weren't used to working uphill. Cross-country was a killer anyway, but that was why Bullet liked it. Running around a cinder track or even hurdling when they put jumps up at specified distances, you might as well be a horse—a trained horse going over the jumps they put out for you. But cross-country—he turned the edge of a field where a pumpkin crop was ripening up and headed south again—cross-country was really tough. You had to be fast, but that was just the beginning. You had to have endurance, too, and quick reflexes. You were going to fall, you always did, but you had to get up fast and keep going. And smart, you had to be able to look at what lay ahead and get ready for it, you had to run smart.

Somewhere between the eighth and ninth mile, he began to feel the work his muscles were doing. From then on, he ran on strength alone, keeping up the steady pace, just not paying any attention to what his body was trying to say to him. After a little while he didn't feel anything. He'd run past it, run through it, and his body got back to the work he intended to do. A year ago, Bullet would have hit that point at around five miles—hit it and gutted his way through it.

For the last quarter mile he ran along the flat beach. That was the way most cross-country courses were, too, a flat run at the end. Bullet sprinted, driving his feet into the wet sand, pumping his arms faster, to force the faster rhythm on his legs.

Back at the dock again he stood straight.

He wanted to fall down onto the boards—he could have thrown up his whole support without any trouble at all, lots of guys did just that at the end of every race. But Bullet stood straight and locked his throat tight. His chest heaved, he couldn't even focus his eyes on anything, as if a film of blood spread over his retinas. He stood straight, arms loose at his

sides, his shaking legs holding him firm. Every muscle in his body had been used and felt it.

Sweat poured down his back and legs, stung in his eyes, soaked his armpits. He liked the smell of sweat.

When his vision cleared, he took a look at the sun. His time was okay. He looked at the water and wanted to fall into it, but because he wanted to, he waited. He knew he could do that to himself, for himself; he'd learned that, too.

The sun hung red, just above the watery horizon—as if it were being sucked down into the water. The water reflected the cloudless gray-blue of the sky. When he no longer needed to, Bullet allowed himself to go swimming. The tide was up. Wind slapped the waves against the sides of Johnny's boat. A single star burned low above the horizon, obscured by the brightness of the sun. Bullet did a shallow dive off the end of the dock, then splashed around for a while. This late in the year you didn't have to worry much about jellyfish. Water soaked his clothes and shoes and all of his skin. He hauled himself back up onto the dock and stood there, looking out. His sneakers were heavy. His hair was plastered onto his forehead and clammy down the back of his neck.

It wasn't even as if his hair was that long, only halfway down his neck, and it looked good, thick and dark brown like his mother's. Some of the people at school—they had hair so long they kept it tied back in ponytails. The old man wanted him to have a crew cut, as if there was something wrong about a good head of hair on a man, as if that had anything to do with anything. It wasn't haircuts the old man cared about, it was being able to give orders. With Johnny gone and Liza gone, there was only Bullet to give orders to. You'd think the old man would learn.

Bullet swung his feet back and forth, the weight of wet sneakers pulling at his thigh muscles. The farm lay behind him, all the flat acres of it, broad fields, patches of woods where raccoons and rabbits and squirrels lived, fields left fallow, fields where cornstalks dried in the September sun, lines of loblollies—he didn't look back, he didn't have to, to see it. He looked across the water at the horizon, to the invisible western shore.

The farm was his now, both a draft deferment and a job. If he wanted it. After a couple years, when Johnny just didn't ever come back, the old man said that to him. "It'll be yours." Ignoring Liza. Bullet just shook his head. The old man thought Bullet was scared of the hard work, but he wasn't, and the old man only thought that because it was an idea he got hold of. The old man got hold of ideas and kept them, clenched tight in his fist, as if that made them true. It was boxes Bullet was afraid of, the kind of boxes the old man built around people he lived with. The draft was a kind of box, too, except that Bullet wasn't so sure he'd mind the army, and he knew for certain he'd make a good soldier; the same way he knew for certain what it would cost him to stay on the farm, waiting for the old man to die.

It wasn't as if his father even wanted Bullet to have the farm. He didn't, he didn't want to let go of the farm ever. Funny, because it was really his wife's farm, her land anyway, the old Hackett place. When they'd gotten married, the old man took over from his father-in-law, who wanted to retire in Florida. The only other person with a claim on it was his wife's sister

who had married and disappeared up north to live with her rich husband. So the farm was his wife's, half of it by law and all of it by rights. But the old man never admitted that, he slapped his name on her, slapped his name on the land, and owned everything. Only, the way he acted and talked, the farm owned him and he hated it. What a life.

For her too, Bullet guessed, living with the old man this way. Except, to watch her work over her vegetable garden, or climb down into Johnny's boat and get the tiller in her hands, he knew she liked it. Whatever the old man did, there was something about her, something proud and bold and brave and strong—the old man couldn't break her, couldn't drive her off. Not if he lived to be a hundred.

The sky grew dark, gray colored with purple, and a few dim stars appeared. The wind blew around him. It was just like the old man to tell him to get his hair cut without giving him a buck for the barber. Do it my way and pay for it with your money. Money Bullet had earned for himself, working for Patrice. Work he'd gotten for himself by going down to the docks early, hanging around, asking if anyone needed an extra hand for the day, doing day work until he met up with Patrice and had a steady job. Hauling crabs all summer. Hauling oysters on winter weekends. Sure, he had the money, he had six hundred and fourteen dollars saved up, and by the end of this fall he'd have enough money to buy himself that sixteen-gauge Smith and Wesson he'd had his eye on for two years. He'd held that gun just once, the only time he'd seen it, at the store in Salisbury. The stock fit into his shoulder like one of his own bones, the triggers moved like a hot knife through cold butter, the balance of the thing made his own twenty-two feel like a Tinker-toy, like the junk it was. He knew what he was saving his money for and it wasn't for haircuts.

With a gun like that, and some practice, he'd—he could see the deer, pronged antlers held up, see it poise for just those crucial seconds listening, see its legs crumple in mid-stride, see it fall while the echoes of that one clean shot still echoed through the trees.

Bullet shook his head to clear the image out of it. He'd learned not to make dreams up for himself, that was part of growing up. Growing up meant you knew what you wanted and you worked for it, and you didn't let yourself get in your own way. Not dreams, not memories—he knew he could allow no weakness in himself if he was going to win free. He could feel the danger of his father's will closing in around him, and he could feel his own strength too. It would cost him, but what didn't cost something? Nothing, that was what. It would cost him this farm that ran acres wide under his feet, that ran acres deep and fertile underneath him. It had already cost him whatever it cost to be different. Nobody knew him anymore—which was funny because all he had done was let his real self out. But everybody saw only the difference. Nobody knew what Bullet was like. Except Patrice. And maybe nobody ever had except Patrice, who didn't mind him as he was, who didn't try to make him into somebody else. Or his mother—she could read him still, he knew, and he could read her too for that matter. But they never talked about that, not in any way. Because it didn't make any difference.

CHAPTER 2

The waves slapped up against the dock and Johnny's boat. More stars appeared. The wind was strong enough to blow the mosquitoes away, so he could stay outside as long as he felt like it. His parents went to bed early. He'd be damned if he'd get his hair cut. He lay back down on his back on the hard wooden dock, looking up at the star-studded sky, and eased up on himself. It was okay, he was alone.

Maybe he'd grow his hair really long, long as Liza's, and wear it in a braid, or two braids. Bullet grinned—that would give the old man something to chew over.

He didn't blame Liza for just going off with Frank—four years ago now. He almost had to respect her for doing it. About the only smart thing she'd done in her life. Or Johnny either packing and going off to college and just never coming back; he didn't much blame him anymore. Trust Johnny to do the smart thing, get a scholarship. Johnny got the brains and Liza got the looks.

It was funny though, and not as if he missed her, but he could always feel how Liza wasn't there. Once Johnny was surely gone, it stopped bothering him, like a board nailed into place. But Liza . . . sometimes, like now, when he was alone with nothing to get done and the sky filled up with stars, he could almost hear her, the way she sang. Bullet couldn't sing a note of the tune, but he could hear songs inside his head, just the way they sounded. Now he heard Liza's voice: "Will there be any stars, any stars in my crown," that voice sang, "when evening the sun goeth down? When I stand with the blest in God's mansions of rest, will there be any stars in my crown?" Well, he didn't know about that, Liza, running off with Frank Verricker like that. He almost hoped they were having a merry old time of it wherever they were. He liked Frank okay, Frank never let anything get through to him, especially not the old man's hostility. Frank just kept on coming back whenever his ship got into Baltimore. You never knew when he'd turn up, in some rattletrap he'd bought. You never knew when you'd see him slouching against the doorframe, about to bust out laughing. "Tell Liza I've come courting. You're welcome this time too, kid, it's a movie. A couple hamburgers. Get you out from under, if you want to." Bullet never wanted to, not bad enough to give in to the wanting; and that puzzled Frank, he could tell. The light eyes would study him, curious about what made Bullet tick. After a while, Bullet said no just to keep Frank puzzled. Liza never kept Frank puzzled, she had her heart out there in her eyes for him. She'd hang around waiting for him to show up, out of the blue, whenever. She was surprised every time when she finally figured out that he'd gone off again, back to whatever ship he was on, without a word to her. You'd think she'd have learned, but Liza never did learn much. Or she learned so slow she was long gone before Bullet would have known about it.

Maybe he'd get his hair trimmed a bare quarter of an inch. Then, when his father said, the way he inevitably would, "I instructed you to have your hair cut," Bullet would give him a receipt, or the clippings in an envelope. Billy-O, the barber, would give him a receipt. He shove the receipt at the old man, and then what could he say?

Although, when it came to a showdown, the old man wouldn't say anything; he'd make Bullet's mother do the saying. To pay her back for standing behind Johnny, maybe. She wanted Johnny to go to college; she stood up for that the way she hadn't stood up for anything before or since, against the old man. And Johnny just walked away, never a letter, never a phone call, all that long year. That long year—who knew what she was thinking?—she never said. The old man never said. One long, quiet year that was, not even an explosion when Bullet flunked fifth grade and had to repeat it. All year long, nobody said a thing. There was one good thing about Johnny's leaving. Another good thing was having him gone, with his orders and his right answers, "Cool it, kid," "Hands off." Johnny was always building something, like that boat—working off his temper on wood. Or the tree house for Liza. Talking at Bullet when he caught him messing with his precious tools, because Bullet was supposed to wait until he was old enough to learn how to use them. "Face facts, kid," Johnny told him. Well, Johnny knew how to face facts, and he taught Bullet how, and Bullet had to be grateful for that. "Face facts, you're a breaker. You better learn the truth about yourself." "So what," Bullet answered him, "sew buttons." But Johnny would stand up to the old man, when he wanted, like about Liza keeping OD, and sometimes Johnny could argue him down. After Johnny left, Bullet figured out that he'd also done some standing between his father and Bullet—but Johnny taught Bullet how to stand up for himself before he walked out.

Bullet guessed he didn't fault Johnny, and he didn't fault Liza either. His eyes roamed around, watching the stars. He guessed his mother didn't either, although he knew that she at least, missed them. Not that she said so, not that she tried to stop Liza from going—but he could read her. And, if he remembered, he remembered how different things used to be, how different she was . . . He could remember seeing her run, her skirt tangling at her legs and himself running to try to catch her and her laughter when she pretended he had—but that was all gone, long gone, faded away, closed off. As far as he could tell, his mother didn't miss it.

Maybe he'd grow braids and wind them up around his head and see how many synonyms his father could think of for effeminate.

Bullet rolled over, sat up, stood up, stretched. Tired. He went back down the dock to the grass. OD was waiting for him on shore. She never would go out onto the dock. Johnny said that was because she had been traumatized by nearly drowning, then explained to Bullet what trauma was. Once, when Liza wasn't around, one long summer day—the first summer Johnny was gone—Bullet had hoisted OD up under his arm and taken her out onto the dock. The water wasn't even deep where he dropped her in, just halfway out the dock. He'd leaned over and dropped her straight down, while her legs scrabbled for a grip on his arms and chest. She didn't howl or anything, just froze stiff and looked at him. Bullet figured, traum

or no, all animals could swim, it was an instinct. But not OD. She sank like a stone, right to the bottom, and he could just barely see her open eyes looking up at him through six inches of murky water. She didn't even move her legs, just like a stone statue. He gave her a while but she never surfaced. So he jumped in and grabbed her. The scratches he'd had—she was out of her mind with fear he guessed. When he dumped her on the beach she just lay there shivering. He watched for a while. Johnny was always right about things, Johnny always knew the answers. It was just that the way he told you made you want to prove he was wrong.

“Isn't that right, OD?” Bullet asked the dog. She wagged her tail and hesitated, wondering if she should come closer. He ignored her.

Maybe he'd have it cut in a Mohican cut. He'd seen pictures of those. They shaved away all the hair except for a broad band down the center of your head. It looked pretty terrible. Maybe he'd do that.

If it hadn't been so muggy, he'd have jogged back up to the house, for the pleasure of the run. But he walked, unrelaxing himself: tomorrow he'd get up at five to take the tractor out and get started on the front cornfield, which would give him a couple of hours at the job before the school bus came.

The wind rustled the grasses and night gathered around him. There were a lot of things the old man didn't do anymore, even though he wasn't that old, just sixty. He didn't even plant in tobacco anymore. The front fields used to be tobacco—hard work, but a cash crop. Now it was corn and tomatoes, easier to grow, easier to harvest. His father wouldn't think about planting anything else, not even soybeans—which made no sense. Except it was new, of course. Bullet could have done the groundwork and legwork on a new crop, but you couldn't work with the old man, you had to work for him. Bullet wasn't having any of that.

The dirt under his feet was packed hard. Night flowed over him. OD sometimes followed behind—he could hear her—or she'd tear off into the grass to flush out something—a muskrat maybe, a possum, something she never caught. You'd think she'd learn.

Bullet didn't know where the idea came from, like a star shooting in a white arc across the sky. But it stopped him in his tracks.

He threw back his head and laughed out loud. Boy, oh boy. He moved quickly up the path laughing in pure pleasure.

He would have his head shaved. Absolutely bald. Boy, oh boy.

That would be worth the money.

He ran up the back steps and across the screened porch into the kitchen. His mother was still there, still wearing the white blouse she'd put on for dinner and the blue high-heeled shoes. She looked at him, and he couldn't read her face. She wore her dark hair in a thick braid down her back, the coolest way to wear long hair.

“You've been swimming alone, that's not too smart,” she said.

Bullet shrugged. He wondered if she was going to ask him not to, because he wasn't about to not go swimming if he wanted to.

She shrugged back at him. “Are you going to have your hair cut?” she asked. Her eyes

didn't give him any messages, one way or the other.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I'll hear a yes or a no from you," she told him.

"Yes," he said.

"I'll say good night then." She got up from her chair, slow but not relaxed. She never relaxed.

Bullet jammed his hands down into the pockets of his shorts. Then he said to her straight back, "Good night, Maw." He heard the teasing in his own voice. There had been some brawls about calling her Maw, which the old man said was common as dirt, as well as illiterate and ill-enunciated.

She hesitated, then turned around to stare at him.

"You," she said.

He knew what she meant; she used to say that to him, "You, boy," when he was about to go too far. Then she'd either get after him or burst out laughing, and he never knew which to expect. He wondered if she knew what he was going to ask Billy-O to do, then realized that she couldn't. She just knew he was going to do something. She knew it the same way he knew that she knew. He could read her and she could read him—which was the closest they came to talking. *You might say it wasn't too awful close*, Bullet thought, and grinned.

CHAPTER 3

Bullet leaned his shoulder against the cinder block wall of the broad corridor leading down to the cafeteria and watched. They moved on past him like a human river, like a herd of cattle heading for the feed troughs.

If you knew how to look you could see the order within the mass. They moved in groups. Jocks announced themselves by their heavy white letter sweaters with the big red W sewed onto the back—even in this heat. He saw Ted Bayson, the football player, with his latest girlfriend. This one was one of the eggheads, he noticed. Eggheads were marked out by their long hair, boys and girls, and the way their girls didn't hang onto them. They were always talking, mostly arguing. Negroes—blacks they wanted to be called now, “Black is beautiful” was the slogan. *Black is black and that's about all there is to say about it*, Bullet thought. They stuck together, heads like a field of black puffballs with afro haircuts, guys and girls, laughing, touching one another with arms around or with punches and slappings, calling out and heehawing. Even the wimps had their own look, rabbitty around the eyes.

When the corridor had emptied, Bullet drifted into the cafeteria. He liked the way the room was divided almost exactly in half between tables of Negroes and tables of whites. They could pass laws and more laws about integration, they could close down the Negro schools and take “White Only” signs off doors, but it didn't change things. Bullet ran his eyes over the tables, looking for an empty seat. He didn't care where he sat or who he sat with. He sat anywhere he wanted to. Nobody invited him, he was never unwelcome, and that was about exactly the way he wanted things. That day, he slid into the bench beside Jackson and Tommy, across from Cheryl and Lou. They looked up to greet him but went on with their conversation. Bullet pulled his sandwiches out of the paper bag. Tommy he'd known forever. Tommy was a senior now, editor of the paper, with his shoulder-length curly red hair held off his face by a bandana worn like an Indian headband, but Bullet remembered him as a plump boy, back in grade school. They'd been in the same grade until Bullet flunked back a year. Tommy had gotten tiresomely liberal during high school; they were all tiresomely liberal these days, gathering up causes like little kids picking up shells and stones at the beach, all excited and thinking how new and wonderful it was. Waiting to find the stone that was magic, Bullet suspected, the one that would make them brilliant, get their names printed in history books. But they never read the history books and figured out what happened to a lot of people just like them: nothing, at best, and getting wiped out, at worst. Tommy was still okay, he did some thinking. Jackson, Tommy's sidekick for a couple of years now, as well as one of the assistant editors on the paper, was a tall, lean, lazy kid. Bored most of the time and looking for something to stir up; boring all of the time, Bullet thought. Jackson didn't much care for Bullet but didn't have the nerve to do anything about it. The girls—Lou and Cheryl

—weren't exactly their girls, weren't exactly not their girls. Lou had a crush on Bullet though she didn't bother to conceal. She was soft, soft wavy hair held back with barrettes, big soft blue eyes. He didn't mind her, much. Cheryl, he respected, for all that most of the time she was around he had the impulse to punch her out. She was the loudest of them, and her opinions came right from whatever magazine she'd last read, and she wasn't too good to look at with her squared figure and little piggly eyes, but nobody scared her, nobody could shut her up. Much as he often wanted to put her mouth out of commission, little as he enjoyed her company, she wasn't as much of a jerk as most other people.

"I actually like a tough teacher," Jackson was maintaining, lying through his teeth. Tommy caught Bullet's eye and looked uncomfortable. "As long as he knows what he's talking about."

"Or her," Cheryl inserted.

"Burn those bras, baby," Jackson said.

"My bra for your draft card," she told him.

"Lay off," Tommy told them. "Don't you ever get tired? I don't know why you bother with Jackson; you've had McIntyre, you know he can't be accused of knowing what he's talking about, so this student teacher might be an improvement."

"McIntyre's mind got lost in 1927," Jackson said. "He's a prime example of a burned-out teacher. If he ever was aflame. Which I doubt seriously. How old is this student teacher, and how did he ever get stuck down here?"

"Do you have him, Bullet?" Tommy asked.

"Bullet wouldn't know, he sleeps through class," Cheryl reported.

"You don't," Lou asked him. "Do you?" She looked as if that was something deliciously wicked.

Bullet took a big bite of his sandwich and chewed it, staring right back at her but not saying anything, until she blushed and looked away. He had looked at the student teacher about once; he was a weedy-looking long-hair with pale skin and a little blond beard about ten hairs thick hanging down from his receding chin. "I don't expect any joy of him," he told them. "But he can't be worse than McIntyre."

"Don't you just wish," Cheryl said.

"Come off it, Cher," Tommy told her. "McIntyre hands out ten dittos a day and then reads them aloud. Aloud. And then you spend the three minutes left at the end of class filling in the blanks he tells you the right answers for, and you hand them in. They're the same dittos he's used for decades. Forty-five minutes a day of screaming boredom. That's what hell must be like," he concluded.

"Hell is other people," Cheryl told him. "Sartre," she informed anyone who might not know, which was, Bullet figured, all of them, including him. Quotes for every occasion, that was what Cheryl had.

"At least McIntyre is always good for a B," Jackson reminded her. "He doesn't know how to give any other grade, his little fingers can't form any other letters. That looks all right o

your record.”

“Some of us are accustomed to A’s,” Cheryl said.

“They should fire him,” Lou said. “I don’t want to have to take the US History course from him if he’s not going to teach us anything.”

“He’s got tenure,” Tommy told her. “They’d have to get him on something, to be able to fire him—if they even want to fire him, if they even know how bad he is. Of course, if you could persuade Cheryl here to seduce him . . .”

“Oh wow, can I watch?” Jackson cried.

“Not on your life, you pervert,” Cheryl said. “Besides, I’m saving myself for Ted Bayson—the body beautiful. I don’t know if Lou would be willing . . .”

“Cheryl,” Lou protested softly.

But Cheryl’s attention had moved on. “I wonder about Meredith—she’s a friend of yours, isn’t she, Lou? What is she thinking of?”

“Obviously,” Tommy assured her, “she’s given up thinking.”

“Who’s Meredith?” Bullet asked.

They all rounded on him, enjoying themselves. “This year’s Bayson girl,” Jackson told him. “Don’t you pay attention to anything, Bullet?” Tommy asked.

“Nope,” Bullet answered. Tommy chuckled, approving and admiring. Even Tommy, who could have figured it out if he’d done any thinking about it, couldn’t figure out what had happened to Bullet, to make him so distant. Bullet knew what had happened—he’d grown up. They talked about being grown up and realistic, but they didn’t have the first idea about what was really involved in it, so they saw Bullet as some kind of mystery man.

“I never had a student teacher,” Lou said.

“Do you think he’s dodging the draft?” Tommy asked Bullet.

“He’s pretty young,” Cheryl answered. “He’s about the right age.”

“What’s his name?” Tommy asked.

“You should have heard McIntyre’s introduction of him,” Cheryl went on. “‘Boys and girls,’ she imitated the wheezy voice, ‘we will be privileged this semester to see all the newest methods in education.’ I ask you, how can anybody be such a jerk?”

“He probably practices at home,” Jackson suggested. “He probably worked for hours on that introduction, making sure it was perfectly jerky. In front of the mirror. What do you think?”

“Oh, I hope not,” Cheryl answered. “No wonder he’s in a perpetual depression.”

“That’s stupor,” Tommy corrected her, “as in drunken.”

“Walker,” Bullet said. They looked at him, surprised. “His name’s Walker, the student teacher’s.”

“Besides, if he’s dodging the draft, he’s got my support,” Jackson said.

“My guess is he flunked the physical—have you seen him? He looks sickly,” Cheryl told them. “He’s probably 4-F.”

“Nobody’s 4-F anymore,” Tommy told her. “They’re only using one classification, the

typewriters in Washington are jammed and they just keep turning out 1-A's."

"I'll be in Canada before they get a chance at me," Jackson said.

"They don't want you in Canada, swelling the rosters on dole," Cheryl told him.

"If I were a boy—" Lou began, but Tommy interrupted her.

"I'll tell you what it's like," he said. He leaned forward a little, the way he always had when he had an idea that he was excited about. "I've been thinking about this for an editorial. It's like dredging for crabs, the draft. They hang the dredge down off the back of the war machine, right? And they sink it into the mud. Steel teeth grind closed." He demonstrated with his hands. They paid close attention, Bullet saw. "And we're all caught in it, just like the crabs. Scrabbling around in the steel-toothed cage. Dump it out onboard and watch the cannon fodder scabble around. Get them into baskets and get those lids on tight. That's just what it is. Ship us out in bushel baskets, ship us back in coffins—what's the difference? We can't do any more about it than the crabs can."

He waited for a minute, looking from face to face. "What do you think?" he asked, his eyes coming to rest on Bullet's face.

Bullet shrugged, thinking it was okay, as far as it went, thinking it would make a pretty good editorial.

"They'll never let you print it," Cheryl announced. "You know that. But it's not a bad metaphor."

"I think it's excellent," Lou said. "I think it's a really good metaphor for the draft."

"On the nose, bossman," Jackson added.

They were all, Bullet knew, frightened. Fear sat behind their eyes as they looked at one another. Fear for themselves, fear for one another. They really didn't know, Bullet thought, and maybe you had to grow up in a family like his to know what was really worth being afraid of. They said they argued from moral conviction, labeled it an oppressive war, a dirty war, an imperialistic war, a war for the big corporations—but he knew fear when he smelled it. The way he figured it, you were going to die anyway, so why let fear of that box you in when you couldn't do anything about it.

"Bullet?" Lou's eyes caught his again. He wished she wouldn't do that. "What do you think?"

Bullet shrugged and crumpled up the brown bag with the wax paper he'd wrapped his sandwiches in.

"Bullet doesn't think, you know that," Cheryl announced. "He's a big champion jock. He's our token jock."

Bullet fixed her with a look, and she shut her mouth. "Doing things, or not doing them, because you're afraid," Bullet said. "That strikes me as a mistake."

It took them a minute to figure out what he meant. Then Jackson snapped, "Yeah, but you're the original Fearless Fostick."

"Bullet does think," Tommy said. "He just doesn't want anyone to find out about it."

"We have nothing to fear but fear itself," Cheryl quoted, her eyes studying Bullet's face.

“Just for once, shut up—or speak for yourself,” Jackson said.

“God knows I am scared,” Tommy said to Bullet. “But there’s a lot more than that involved, and you know it.”

Bullet shrugged. He didn’t know that.

“Whatever you say.” Tommy’s voice got sullen.

“Hey, I didn’t *say* anything,” Bullet pointed out.

“And it’s worth being afraid of, anyway,” Cheryl said. “It’s unrealistic not to be.”

“But he wasn’t talking about being afraid. He was talking about what you do about being afraid,” Lou defended Bullet. He didn’t know why she did that—he wasn’t looking to win an argument.

“Besides, the draft’s unconstitutional,” Tommy said. The other three gathered around the argument. Bullet watched them, all leaning toward one another, four heads of long hair, and four of them convinced they could get rid of this problem by talking about it. “Or if not the draft, the war itself. The Constitution lays out the only way that war can be declared.”

“You forget that war hasn’t been declared,” Jackson pointed out.

“Then we’re sending in mercenaries. Right? Foreign troops paid to fight somebody else’s battles. Besides, the case is that soldiers are fighting. For which our government is paying them. If troops are sent into combat, isn’t that war?”

“What’re you going to do, sue the army?” Jackson asked.

“Why not? A class action suit—there’s a possibility there. At least you could drag it out for years and keep away from the draft.”

“Why not just go to law school?” Lou suggested. “The war can’t last forever.”

“Do you know how long the French were fighting before they pulled out?” Cheryl asked her. “A long time,” she answered herself.

“Or the navy,” Lou said. “Law school and then the navy.”

“I’m willing to consider anything,” Tommy said.

“Marriage and procreation,” Cheryl suggested. “A couple of babies, fast. Or bigamy?”

“Talk about a fate worse than death,” Jackson said.

“I think it’s terrible what they’re doing to us,” Lou said. “To all of us. It really is.”

“War is hell,” Cheryl said. Bullet watched them react to that.

“What do you know about it?” Jackson demanded. “They don’t draft women. They don’t even let women into the combat zones, not even near them. You want equality? As far as I’m concerned, you can have it. You can get out there and take your chances with the rest of us. It’ll improve the odds for me at least.”

“I don’t know—the experience might help you grow up,” Cheryl snapped.

“I’m worried about living long enough to grow old,” Jackson told her. “Growing up will have to take care of itself.”

Bullet stood up abruptly. *Jerks*. He’d had enough of their conversation for a day. When they talked like that—and they most often did—it was so stupid he felt like taking a blunt needle and sewing their lips together. They just didn’t know what they were doing, the

didn't even know what they wanted to do, if they could do what they wanted. "See you," the said, to his back.

Algebra slid by, and shop. Bullet raised his head from the carburetor he was taking apart, inhaling the odors of oil and sawdust and metal, looking over the long room. Voices mingled with the clinking of metal; the diagrams were drawn out on a movable chalkboard. One of the heads at another table was raised just then, to look at him. The big head nodded, one hand went up to scratch at the edge of the rolled-up T-shirt in a nervous gesture. Bullet held the eyes but did not respond, and the guy went back to whatever he was doing. This year was a test case, and that Bullet could figure out what they were doing didn't make it any less irritating. It had been going on for years. It started the year he stayed back, sixth grade coming after him, seventh graders too. "Rub your nose in the dirt," they'd said, "you're a dummy." He hadn't minded, and if he hadn't won all of the fights, especially not at first, he never would have. He never been the one to call quits. Two years of it, and it had taken him about that long to figure out what their problem was with him. He wasn't acting the way kids who flunked were supposed to act. After a while, there wasn't anybody who'd come back for a second fight, and then Patrice had asked if he was having the fights he wanted to have or the ones they wanted to have. Things got down to about once a year, then, test cases. That was how he'd met Tom Bayson, who thought he could pound Bullet into going out for football, who wouldn't believe that Bullet just wasn't interested.

This year, it was this vocational track guy from shop. He'd started in right away, the first day of school, pushing at Bullet, looking for a fight. "What do we have here? One of the college preppies come slumming? You come slumming, little boy?" He was big, oxlike, and used to scaring people. Bullet gave him time, gave him nothing to go on. His friends tried to shut him up, but the guy had to show off, wouldn't listen to them. He wasn't too swift. He kept pushing, and when the Negroes on the other side of the big room nudged each other, grinning and murmuring "Go Whitey," he didn't even know they were goading him on. "You're a whitey with the hair. You and your fag friend, Tommy Hill. Heap big editor. You eggheads make me want to puke."

Bullet just looked at him and waited. *It's up to you*, he thought. *I'm not interested in you. You can dig your own grave if that's what you want.*

"Hey, man, take it easy, that's Tillerman," one of the ox-guy's friends said, pulling back the thick arm.

"Tiller-man? You gotta be kidding. Looks like Tiller-girl to me. With all that pretty hair." His friends didn't know whether to laugh like they were supposed to, or what.

Bullet waited, letting his anger boil slow: when people were this stupid and wouldn't listen because they didn't listen to anybody . . . and wouldn't leave him alone. . . . It burned him the way people thought because he was built small they could take him on, or walk all over people just because they were over six foot and heavy; they thought they could run him down. He was scared. *Jerks.*

"I'll see you in the parking lot after school, Tiller-girl," the big jerk said. Bullet had

shrugged, had met him and had blacked both of his eyes before he let him go bleed on his friends for comfort. He'd figured out before he got there behind the pickups what the guy should get. Two black eyes, to mark him for a week and get the message out clear for the year. A couple of punches to the diaphragm so he'd drop his guard, then wham! The guy had been knocked to his knees by the first real punch Bullet delivered. Bullet had to wait for him to get up before he could black the left eye.

"Hey," the guy had said, surprise making his voice high, starting to back away, "I didn't—"

Bullet got at him again, diaphragm, eye. *I know you didn't and what you didn't. Didn't think I show up, did you? Didn't think I'd be able to touch you. And now you want to back out, but it's your fight. You wanted it, now you've got it, and let's finish it.*

When Bullet had finished it he walked away, to wash off the blood on his hand from the guy's nose and get on down to practice. Ever since, the guy had tried to be friendly, sort of nodding and keeping a respectful distance. He even tried apologizing, "Hey, man, I'm sorry I didn't know—"

"You didn't put up much of a fight," Bullet cut him off, the only time he'd spoken to him. People like that—bullies who stepped on other people just because their feet were big enough—they should be put down. Like runts. They were as bad as the fear-run people they stepped on, who toadied around them. Bullet didn't want to have anything to do with any of them. Every year one of them would try him out, somehow. Every year he'd have to show whoever that he wasn't to be messed around with, then they'd all leave him alone. He didn't know what their problem was with him, although he could guess—some kind of King of the Mountain game. One thing he could say about the Negroes, they never tried him out; they seemed to know he had nothing to do with them.

CHAPTER 4

After school, Bullet jogged down to the field, without changing. He ran in sneakers, and in hot weather he just wore a pair of shorts to school under his jeans. Bullet didn't mind practice. The coach left him pretty much alone. The coach was a big guy, over two hundred pounds, but in good shape for all of his fifty-odd years. He'd played baseball good enough for collegiate championships in his day. He coached baseball in the spring, track in the fall and filled in with gym classes during the winter. Summers he worked as a lifeguard for a pool in Delaware. He'd always known enough to leave Bullet alone, ever since Bullet showed up in the fall of ninth grade. The track team wasn't much, mostly guys who couldn't make the football team but were too serious about sports to want to take gym. The coach worked them, keeping track of them all, sprinters and milers, high and long jumpers, hurdlers, pole vaulters, javelin throwers and the cross-country too. They each had to enter three events, he told them, because the school had to have four people in each event to hold a meet against another school. Bullet did javelin throw and high jump, with cross-country. Once the coach had asked him to do the fifteen hundred meter run, or hurdles, because he was fast, but Bullet wouldn't. The first year he was on the track team, he'd run the relay, but after that he picked his own events. His run was cross-country, and he didn't want to use up energy on any other running event. He usually came in somewhere between second and fifth in high jump and javelin, depending on the competition. He'd never lost a cross-country race, never even come close to losing. The team was always invited to the state championships, but the school never placed because the rest of the team wasn't good enough. You got ten points for a first but only five, three, two for the other places. Only Bullet could collect the ten.

He didn't mind, he'd been state champion for two years. The coach minded some, but Bullet couldn't help him with that. If you didn't have the talent to put on the field, you just didn't have it. Bullet's accumulated points over the season got them into the championships trials and that was all he could do for them.

The first part of practice Bullet spent warming up with a few jumps and throws. He took it easy. If he jumped over six-and-a-half he started landing wrong, pulling muscles or bruising joints he needed in good working order for cross-country. He could get up as high as he wanted, higher than any of the other jumpers, but he took it easy against the risk of spraining or breaking something when he came down. "You land like some rag doll, Tillerman," the Coach said. "You've got to roll with it, use your shoulders."

Bullet shrugged. He could get high enough.

A two-mile cross-country trail had been laid out behind the field, so familiar that Bullet could run it without thinking—which wasn't much use to him. That day, early in September, the coach stopped Bullet as he went over to start the runners: "That new guy, see him

Bullet nodded, his eyes on the tall Negro with heavy, muscular legs, long thighs and short calves, who stood away from the other two cross-country entrants, both white. "He might be okay for cross-country. He's a hurdler, pretty good."

"Okay," Bullet said. He knew what the coach was going to say next, he always knew. *So how he goes*, he predicted.

"See how he goes."

And don't try to run him out this first time.

"And don't try to run him out this first time."

Bullet didn't say anything. He stood in the sunlight, waiting to be given the nod to go. The coach nodded to him.

The Negro approached Bullet, near the start. He held his hand out. Bullet didn't take it or shake. The Negro acted as if nothing had happened. "Name's Tamer, Tamer Shipps. He tells me I should run cross-country."

Bullet didn't say anything. This Tamer looked older than most high school students, but looked about twenty—but Negroes tended to look older; they aged differently too, something to do with the skin, he figured. The old Negroes around town had white-gray hair, but their skin didn't look dried-out and papery. The other two runners were a tenth and eleventh grader. Neither had the musculature of this Tamer, or Bullet either. Tamer had closely cropped black hair and deep brown skin, broad nose and full lips, and, under heavy eyebrows, eyes that looked awake.

"Okay," he said now. "I read you, Whitey. Just tell me what to do."

"Run," Bullet said. "Run as fast as you can and keep running."

"You sho' does make it sound fun, massa," Tamer said. His mouth didn't move, but his eyes looked amused.

Beats picking cotton.

Tamer had a broad, stubborn jaw, and it looked like he needed a shave. They stared at each other for a few seconds. Bullet shrugged. Tamer's big shoulders straightened. They moved apart, going separately and at different rates to the starting point, where a broad dirt path entered a stand of pines. The two other runners came to join Bullet. "Hey," they said without eagerness. "Hey, Bullet." He nodded at them, raised one arm and then let it fall abruptly to start them off.

The two-mile course made a big circle. It covered no hills, neither were there any ditches, but it crossed some fields and a couple of creeks. It wasn't much of a course. But people were more interested in football, basketball and baseball—that was where the money for field coaches and equipment went. And cheerleaders and uniforms. It didn't hurt Bullet any; it just pissed him off to have to run on such a rinkydink course. He ran the practice the same way he ran every race: he took up an immediate lead and pulled farther ahead with every step. He ran alone.

Up rises, leaping shallow gulleys, splashing through the creeks where muddy bottom was caught at his shoes—he ran beside a tomato field with just a few fat globules ripening on the

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