

Men in Pink Tutus

By Stefani Nellen (originally published in Glimmer Train)

The Last Meeting

My father stood in my doorway at five in the morning. He wore a pink tutu and his running shoes. The tutu's sequin-studded top shimmered when he inhaled, expanded by his still broad chest and his new beer belly. Layers of transparent, stiff skirts rode around his hips like a wedding cake decoration. He held a magic wand, a silver-sprayed plastic star glued to an ice cream stick. He had sprinkled glitter on his hair. I could smell the mint on his breath and – more surprising than the tutu – cigarette smoke.

"Hurry up Sarah. We're going for a run."

"Dad, it's the middle of the night. Come inside."

"No. This is important."

He had left my mother and me two years ago. Since then, he had sent me a couple of unicorn postcards. There was never much text, apart from the obvious. *Sarah: I'm alive, I'll be back, hang in there.* The real message seemed to come from the eye-rolling, teeth-baring unicorns who stared at me as if I was one of them.

I made a show of cursing under my breath while I put on sneakers, but the truth was, I had been awake anyway. Tutu or no, I had expected him at my door in the middle of the night, and now that he had showed up, it was as if no time had passed at all.

Like many athletic people, my father had a sadistic streak.

"Small strides," he said. "Ease into the hill." He meant well. They all do.

We soon passed the convenience store where I worked with my college buddy, Abe, and his mother. Our stuffed crow, Fitzgerald, sat on top of a soup pyramid. A smile of tin teeth dangled from a hook above the dental practice next door. It was the night before bulk trash day, so we ran past ghost furniture, gutted sofas, skeletal lamps, deconstructed shelves. The cars on the curb guarded the furniture trash, metal turtles layered in a crystal pattern of frost. It was almost summer, but this was a cold night.

"Stop," I wheezed.

My father turned around. He waved the magic wand at me with the gesture of a child in a booster seat spilling puréed carrots all over the table with glee, and I found my breath again. What a strange night, I thought, in a slow cadence that reminded me of Abe. What a strange night. Sinews rose from my father's neck, and he bared his teeth. He screamed without making a sound.

"Dad?"

He didn't try to catch his fall. He hit the asphalt like a corpse cut from a rope. The wand flew out of his hand.

I waited.

His white satin butt stuck up, right in the center of the lantern light.

What a strange night. And here came a click of a screen door, the curious neighbors, and the porch light without comment, an ochre light that made my father

look ugly and human. I walked towards him and blocked it out. My belly wobbled like the chest of a sage grouse. I hadn't felt it at all while running.

His left leg jutted out from under the pink tutu skirts, and his hair was stiff with glitter. A little warmth was left under his hair and close to the skull, but it was soon gone, and when the blue light of the ambulance washed over us, there was no doubt anymore that he was a dead body. But no, he gave a last gasp! Sequins scratched across the asphalt. That was the last sound he made.

My Father's Family. (a) I, Sarah. Don't look.

I wished I could have hated my father. He stood at the side of the track in his navy running tights and stared at the stopwatch in his palm. My mother circled the track, as metronomic as a plastic horse in an amusement park ride. She wore apple green compression socks and a matching baseball cap. The grass on the infield was hot and raspy, and the crickets chirped under the stands.

I walked down the track, pushed small stones off the tartan surface, and counted the times my mother lapped me. I made my own jackets out of felt or corduroy, and lived inside them, all sweaty, in my underwear. If my father had forced me to put on compression socks and run, I would have hated him.

Instead, he played me videos of miracles. Running miracles. Rod Dixon winning the New York City marathon in the driving rain, his shirt sticking to him like transparent skin, like a uterus, his moustache a soggy brush. Abebe Bikila skipping over the cobblestones of Rome, his calm face illuminated by flickering torchlight.

Joan Benoit waving her cap at hundreds of thousands of candy-colored faces at the

LA Coliseum. Other families have movies of children splashing in pools, or close-ups of Polish sausages burning on a grill while uncle Herb is strumming 'I Shot the Sherriff'. Our family memorabilia were of runners.

Once, he let me hold his medal from the Boston marathon. It was cold and heavy and about the size of my palm.

"Great," I said, when I saw what it depicted. "A unicorn head on a platter."

He squinted, raised his hand, and stroked my eyebrows with one knuckle.

(b) The Kids

That's how my father called them. He was the distance coach of our college track team. The head coach, Salvo, wore a whistle around his neck. It hung there like a threat of something that could sound really unpleasant if he wanted it to.

We had issues of *Track and Field News* in the bamboo husk basket in the bathroom. We had stacks of coaching drills manuals and nutrition journals on the couch, in the kitchen drawers, and next to our shoe rack. Sometimes, a cover showed a pack of young runners cresting a hill: *The College Issue!* The teams in the *College Issue* had names: Wildcats, Razorbacks, Huskies. Never Poodles, Ringworms, or Armadillos. Our team didn't have an animal name. I called them The Speedsters, because it is one of the words outsiders use when talking about runners. Meteor Miler. The Eldoret Express. The Jamaican Jet. The Sunnyvale Speedsters.

To me, they were the best runners in the world. At one moment, they shuffled around the track and bumped into each other in a show that I mustered effortlessly every morning, and the next moment, at a signal from my father, they were flying. At

the end of a workout, my father had the boys chase the girls. I always hoped that one of them would get away, but it never happened. My father wanted the girls to last longer each time. That was enough for him. The chase always came down to the same couple: a strong, red-haired girl and an African boy with glasses. She ran like a boxer, her face and belly flush red, and he stayed right on her shoulder, light as a spider. She refused to fall back and end it, and he refused to overtake her, until, finally, out of mercy, he did. The moment he was clear of her, she staggered to the infield and sprawled on her back, her arms and legs a big X.

(c) My Mother

My mother, Lauren, was part of my father's memorabilia collection. She lived in movies, in pixels, in the land of red tracks and plastic bottles and bouncing triple jumpers. She had made the Olympic team in the 5000m just out of college. In the Trials video they referred to her race as her "coming out party", although the idea of this girl partying was ridiculous. She tried, though. She wore glittering red-white-and-blue hairpins, waved at the crowd, and put her hands on her non-existing hips when they introduced her at the starting line (but later, she said: the favorites were all injured that day, so it didn't count).

She and my father met later, at the expo of a race she was meant to run but couldn't, because of yet another injury. Her bones were as stable as baked sawdust, and her muscles were sheets of inflammation. At the same time, the Olympic semi-final was already history. This was one tape we never watched together, but my father had it, I knew he did, and one day I found it at the bottom of the drawer.

Lauren, Olympics. The runners lined up without much fanfare; it was only the semi, after all. My mother was one of many, not much taller than the Africans, her hair pulled back in a ballerina bun, her shoulders bony and wet from sweat. A shot sounded, the women started. She flew along with the leaders. A couple of laps in, she started limping. The right side of her body stiffened up. Her hairpins kept on glittering, and she kept on running, dragging one leg behind her. The commentator (the same one who had called her win a coming out party) said that that she was putting up a gutsy performance, but he sounded disgusted. The leaders lapped her and elbowed her out of the way, and an official pulled her off the track. She finally tore the dumb pins out of her hair, wrapped a towel around her shoulders, and strode away. "And thus," the commentator concluded, "Lauren Kelly's Olympic dream comes to a sad end."

She trained with my father. She was on an eternal comeback trail. She raced on the road, in small local races she often won, and trained on the track. On the track, she moved fast, much more smoothly than the red-haired speedster. At home, she was covered in tape and ice packs. The rattle of pill bottles followed her around the house. She had ultrasound machines for her bones, slept on a massage table, face down, and my father rolled out her muscles with a stick.

She and my father didn't talk. They were too busy taking care of their two children: her wretched body and her huge talent. I was probably conceived as therapeutic intervention, a hint for her body to do its job. I hadn't been very effective.

After my father had died, I brought the tutu to my mother's place. It sat on the couch like a guest.

"Have you ever seen him wear this?" I asked.

She leaned towards the thing, slowly, careful. "No. But I like it." She picked up a layer of lace and rubbed it between her fingers.

"Why?"

"It reminds me of my last race."

She had stopped running shortly after he had left us. I never asked why. I wouldn't have asked her why she had stopped hammering her thumb, either. Some things just need to stop. But now she smiled. She let the lace travel between her fingertips.

The tutu was enormous. It looked custom made.

"During that 5k, I was hurting," she said. "I was working hard to beat high school girls, for god's sake. My knee was taped up again, I sweated, the tape came loose...I decided to jog it in. And suddenly, this guy was running next to me. He had a hairy chest and a beard, and he wore a pink tutu. You know what they say: if you're a runner, you don't want to be beat by the guy in the pink tutu. But he looked at me..."

I held my breath. *He lifted his magic wand*, I wanted to say. *Didn't he?*

"I *understood*," she said. "I understood that I could stop if I wanted to. I didn't have to do this. So I stopped. I dropped out right there, walked to the curb. And...the moment I did it, a weight dropped off my shoulders. It was over for good. I haven't run a step since then."

She let go of the lace. "And it feels fabulous."

"But why do you think Dad wore the tutu?" I asked.

She moved her jaw. Her face hardened. "Who knows why he did anything? Who knows why he had to come back that night, and make sure you saw him die."

She got up. Her hand shot to her back. She froze in a lopsided curtsy position.

"Damn," she hissed. I waited. When she didn't move, I offered her my arm, and slowly helped her upright.

"Anyway," she said, after a few deep breaths, "now you know about runners and the pink tutu men." She looked at me with that familiar look, which told me she didn't expect me to understand a single word of what she was saying.

But he has come to me, I thought. And I'm not a runner.

It has to mean something.

The Time He Left

He left us in the summer I turned seventeen. Before he left, he stopped sleeping. He sat up all night, together with me.

School would be over soon, and I didn't feel fit for life at all. I didn't think I had earned it. To be on the safe side, I wanted a medieval job: bricklayer, midwife, gravedigger. These jobs weren't available, or if they were, I couldn't ask about them the right way. Excuse me, Ms. Career Advice, I was thinking about rat catcher. Exterminator. Pest Control. No, I'm not kidding. These are useful jobs, for god's sake.

I sat still for hours in the dark kitchen while the fan turned overhead. One word came up in my mind, then nothing, nothing, nothing, and another. At parties, I

drank so I didn't have to talk. At night, when the Speedsters trained, I went to the track. I could lose myself in the pattern of their strides, warm-up jogs and laughs, the school colors tied into the girls' braids, the snot, spit, and black spike wounds in the floodlights.

Once, the African boy who always chased down the red-haired girl stopped at the edge of the track, right where I was sitting in the dark. He grabbed the steel fence with both hands, rounded his shoulders, and vomited with three coughs. The wet sound slapped me awake. He looked up, right at me, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His lips were still wet when he was done. My heart was in my throat. *I need to get out*, I thought. *I need to get moving. I need to get out.*

"Is someone going to move their ass to the start?" Salvo shouted. The boy turned around and trotted back to the group. I scanned the bleachers, the infield, the top of the stairs, and the fence in front of the parking lot, but my father was gone. He had never been there. My head buzzed, like the intrusion of reality when I was about to wake from a nightmare, but I didn't wake up. I had never had a father. I had imagined him.

"He's sick," my mother said the next morning. "He is seeing a doctor. I told you?" He stayed home after that. "Stress." The Speedsters had a poor season. They gained weight, had mono, and tore tendons. Salvo killed them.

To Summarize:

There were thunderstorms every night. My father and I sat in the kitchen and ate dry cereal. Lightning lit up our faces. He started to smell sour. I could go for days

without sleep, he couldn't. My mother did contortions on a rubber ball. Salvo visited and banged his gym bag into a photo of Zatopek in the hallway. I sat in the kitchen and gave him the evil eye.

"Your father's not doing that great," he said when he noticed me.

I said I could tell.

"Let's hope he comes around," he said. The stubble on his cheeks moved while he chewed his gum. "See ya."

My father whispered to himself. His lips moved. Crumbs stuck to his lips.

"Dad," I said.

"I need to get out of here," he said. The kitchen was muggy, even at night, and my father was stealing my thoughts. We were entering each other's dreams.

This was in the time before he left. This is all I remember.

The morning he left, he was calm. He had shaved, he smelled better, and his face had settled down. He gave me a big hug I could feel all the way to my bones.

It could have been an awful morning: our family broke. My father left. Depressing books material, your entry ticket to Pitiful Central. Cue wistful memories: My dear old dad with his delightful stopwatch, which I would keep in a glass next to my bed, where other people keep their dentures.

No, I thought it was exciting. He left, but it didn't feel like an ending. It was the beginning. The first bird had left the nest. Why should families always work like this, that parents build the nest and feed the children, who pay them back by leaving? In our family, there were no parents. There was just the three of us, and we fed each other for a while, and then we all had to leave.

My father had been the first bird out of the nest. I knew I would be the last.

My mother was next. By watching her struggle, I could forget my own future for a while. She was the girl left behind at the playground. Her running injuries had been perverse and glamorous. Now she was doing paperwork all night and trying to cook food that wasn't oatmeal or turkey salad wrap or muscle milk pancakes.

"I want to sell this place," she said. "I want to work."

She tried to train with Salvo, but they ended up fighting, and she stormed off the track wrapped in a white towel, like she had at the Olympics. "You can't beat yourself, Lauren," he shouted after her. I heard the chewing gum in his voice. "So stop trying!"

"I don't know," she said to me that night. She drank water out of a plastic bottle with a daisy print on it. "I don't know how this works. Would you like to do more things together? Would you like me to be more of a mom?"

"You're okay," I said. She kept playing with the green lid of the bottle.

"Yeah?" she said. Her fingers trembled. "You think so?"

About a year later, she was administrative staff at the school of Engineering. Salvo had gotten her the job. She had sold the house and most of the furniture, and the massage table had been the first to go. I had moved into my own place, a so-called studio in the apartment building of a distant cousin, who needed tenants.

"I think he'll be back," I said, knowing she would understand immediately whom I meant.

"He had to leave," she said. "It sounds bad. It sounds like as if it's no reason at all. It *is* bad. But one day, you might decide to do exactly the same thing. It happens."

My mother was right. The day after her pink tutu men anecdote, I decided to leave. It happens.

My Departure

Abe and his mother saw me off. I kept calling Abe my college buddy, even though we had both dropped out. He had been an experiment. His brain was brilliant. He had been on a six months internship in Switzerland along with fourteen other kids who had shown outrageous aptitude for language and simultaneous translation, and who were trained to translate and comment during minor business meetings of banks in Zürich in order to get a taste of a career in international trade. He had come back with a special headset, big plans, and a suitcase full of chocolate. The problem was his genes. He lacked an enzyme, one you couldn't afford to miss, and the medication he took to compensate sent his brain from overdrive to hibernation every couple of months. It wore him out. When we had met, he had been at equilibrium.

"I want to have a medieval job," I told him. "I want to do something I understand, I want to understand why I exist, what the fuck my point is."

He had eyelids like seashells, and wet-looking curls that always stuck to his brow. "You're dumb, Sarah," he said. We were driving around Morningside. The reindeer-in-bubble Christmas decorations were out, and he took photos with his cell, and I was at the wheel. "You can't say, oh, a gardener has a useful job, because he's pushing a heap of weeds around in his wheelbarrow, and at the same time look down on the guy who is writing scripts that allow you to track packages online. The whole world is about pushing weed around. Life is medieval."

"You're saying it's all good, and I can't make mistakes, because it's all the same."

"Yep."

I didn't mind being with him when he was in hibernation or in overdrive. I could do little more than sit and be in the same room with him, but this was more than most people put up with. It was easy for me, as easy as sitting in the dark bleachers when my father had still coached the Speedsters, but his mother was grateful—so grateful she granted both of us asylum in her convenience store. "You'll figure it out," she said to me on my first day. "For now, you're here." She was tall, tough, and bled out, like wood that had dried in the sun. She had put her all into Abe's health and education, but his prognosis was bad.

"Well," she'd say, "here we are. Still afloat."

I left early in the morning. It was already hot, and Abe and his mother had put out the parasols and the ice cream trunk. Fitzgerald wore a mini straw hat.

Abe gave me a big hug that almost broke my ribs, like my father had that day. "Have fun," he said. "And take care of Pete." Pete was the name of his car. With his medication, he couldn't drive anymore. Pete was old, broad, flat, and maroon.

"Safe travels now," Abe's mother said. She shook my hand. "We really hope you'll be back."

"Fitzgerald is not going to let anybody touch a single can of soup before you're back," Abe said. My mother wasn't there. She didn't want me to leave.

"You can't do this," she said. "You've never even driven out of town."

"It's summer," I said. "I want to do some coming of age stuff. I'm already behind the curve. It's my money, after all." Dad had left me some.

She scuffed, and rightly so. I didn't tell her that my coming of age didn't interest me, and that I had another mission: Find a pink tutu man. She had told me the anecdote of her last race, after all. *Runners and pink tutu men*, she had said, as if there was no hope in the world that I would ever understand her. But sometimes it takes an outsider to understand.

I wanted to surprise her. If she didn't understand why my father had come back wearing a tutu, I would.

She wanted an itinerary, a cell phone number, and GPS tracking. She did not want a lost or missing daughter.

"I hope you realize what you're doing to me," she said, her eyes and mouth scrunched up. "I'm already worried sick."

But she probably also knew that Abe wouldn't travel anymore, and that parents should be grateful for being worried sick about solo road trips in maroon cars instead of missing enzymes and eroded brains.

"Make sure you eat," she said. "And sleep."

The Way Out

I could feel it when I left the circumference of our town. My mother had been right: I had never driven out of town. Pete was an odd car to drive without Abe next to me. The seats were too broad, and so was the road. The steering wheel had grown. A couple of times, I thought the engine was roaring out of control, and put my foot off

the accelerator. My hands were sweating ice cold, the way they had during my driver's test. I drove slowly, far on the right; I had memorized the route to my first stop. The car smelled of my new running shoes on the back seat.

I had found out that there was barely a set of coordinates in the country where people hadn't put up a start and a finish line and declared a footrace. All it took was some fences, volunteers in bright yellow jackets, and inflatable arches, and you had Uncle Bob's 10K, Fitt's Home and Garden 5K, The IKEA Half (with 1k fun run), and so forth. And after searching online race reports, I had found out another thing: Where there is a footrace, there are pink tutu men. My mother's encounter had not been unique. *Runners and pink tutu men*. You only need to put on a pair of running shoes to lure them out.

This was my plan.

There were two basic kinds of pink tutu men encounter.

One: He passes you. You quit.

"I followed Pfitz 18/70 and thought I'd run a personal record no matter what, but when this guy in the pink dress pulled past me and waved his magic wand, I knew it was over."

"Some might say it's weak to drop out of a race, but come on. How can you go on after that? He wore a wig, too."

"He grinned at me, and I thought, dude...At that point, I was done. I hit the wall so hard. The next six miles were a complete knuckle-drag. My first Boston where I didn't manage to re-qualify for Boston. I didn't bother to collect my medal."

Two: He passes you. You crush it.

"I wanted to give up. I had vomited twice. Please. But whenever I looked up, this guy in pink ran right next to me, and I refused to stop. I ended up running a PR by almost a minute!"

"If a guy in a pink tutu can finish NYC in less than three hours, so can I."

"I wanted to thank him after I finished, but I couldn't find him. I only saw him from afar, drinking beer with three girls."

An army of pink tutu men travelled the world, each of them on his way to meet a runner. What if my father had been part of it?

Pulling up at the parking lot next to the start of the Firecracker 5K, I thought that I would really like that.

Things I've Seen

I had a schedule of road races. My mother could see where I was because of my cell phone locator, but she didn't know what I was doing.

I tried to run. My new shoes became dirty.

This kind of running was so different from track races. There was music, there were buckets of banana pieces and sugar gels, and the slowest finisher was escorted to the finish by a bike. But the biggest difference was in the shapes and sizes of the runners. My mother and her competitors had looked like siblings: Sleek panthers with delicate rib cages, lean thighs and androgynous hips. These road-runners could have been from different species. (i) Women in pink. (ii) The leathery, silver-haired metronomic types. (iii) The surfer-types with zinc ointment on the nose. (iv) The local elites with the sponsored gear. (v) The lumberjacks. (vi) The

spiritual walkers. (vii) The tan ponytail girls. (viii) The memory people, with photos and obituaries printed on their shirts.

I had been scared to line up for a race. I expected to be able to run as much as I expected to be able to fly. But the crowd of people carried me along. We didn't compete, after all. We were making a statement. We were performing a ritual. For all I knew, we were making moving crop circles. I didn't have to explain why I ran, and no one told me I was too slow. The most difficult thing about running in these races, I soon found out, was pinning on the race numbers.

My life had a new rhythm: Sleep, shower, breakfast, plot out the way to the next race, enter, run, scout for pink tutu men, pick up dinner, search for a place to sleep (or prepare Pete's backseat for another night). In the beginning, each of these steps had taken me a long time, but soon the days rushed by. I washed my clothes, cut my hair, and increased my radius. I became an expert on different energy foods and sport drinks. I recognized the beep of the timing mat when I passed the waypoints of the race, and I learned to look out for the term *pasta dinner* in the race descriptions. I could sit at a table with strangers, and they asked me how long I had been running. Some asked where my parents were.

My parents. Before they had me – before they met – they had probably lived like I was living now. They had been traveling from one day to the next, busy with maintaining their life, and planning treats such as a movie or a bath. My father had been living like this in the end, I knew. He had managed to find unicorn postcards at filling stations. He had worn a tutu.

I saw many people in costumes, but no pink tutu men. My father's death must have marked the territory. I had to move out.

Dan

At the Ocean Mist Marathon, I met a pink tube dress man. He sat opposite me at the pre-race pasta dinner.

By then, I felt easy inside my skin. Being away from home agreed with me. I was a ball of wool that had just about unrolled. Life was small and simple.

"So, you're going to run the full?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, mixing the tomato sauce with his spaghetti. With his light brown skin and black curls, he could have shepherded a flock of sheep. He reminded me of Abe, or of how Abe could have been with all his enzymes. Had I written to him like I had promised? I must have.

"Pass me the parmesan?" he asked.

I obliged.

"That's an interesting outfit you have," I said.

"I know, right? Look." He got up, put one leg on the bench, and pushed the dress up his thigh. The fabric snapped back into place the moment he let go, as if it was magnetic, and his skin made of metal.

"See?" He said. "It's special fiber. No seams, no chafing. I got it from a friend who works at the innovations lab of a dancewear company." He leaned closer. "It's the new frontier. Top secret."

"I see," I said. "If you tell me more, your friend will be in trouble."

"Yes," he said. "I'm Dan, by the way."

After the pasta dinner, we walked along the beach. It was a small beach. It looked as if the road had first crumbled and then stopped, and that was that. Tree roots, hydrants, and houses were all nearby, but it was still a beach, with a NO CAMPING sign, and we took off our shoes. I wasn't keen on returning to the 12-bunk-beds- and-one-bar-of-soap paradise that was the local youth hostel.

"I want to go sub-3 tomorrow," Dan said. "That would be a new marathon PR."

I had planned on dropping out as soon as I had found a pink tutu man – or verified there wasn't one in the field. Twenty-six point two grueling miles. Exactly. Why not stop at five?

"So what brings you here?" Dan said.

He was so similar to Abe. I felt I could trust him. And I was far away from home, far enough to talk about my life. No one knew me here.

"I'm looking for men in pink tutus. They show up in races and wave magic wands." Dan dug his toes into the sand. He was barefoot.

"For how long have you been doing this?"

For a moment, I wasn't sure. How long had I been doing this? How did my mattress feel in the morning? What was the sound of my mother's voice?

"I've been doing this for a while now," I said.

"Why?"

The sand shifted underneath me.

"My father's a pink tutu man." I had never said it out loud before.

Dan pulled up his brown shoulders, the futuristic fabric stretching around his chest.

"How did you find out?" he said.

"He came to me in the middle of the night wearing his tutu. We ran together, he waved his magic wand, and he died."

He started walking again. I followed. He kept looking up at me in a way that would have made me uncomfortable at home. Now I felt powerful. *You think this is crazy? There's more.*

"I never thought of them as having kids," he said. "But sure. Why wouldn't they?"

And like that, from one moment to the next, I wanted to bail from this conversation. He had not only acknowledged the existence of the pink tutu men, he was speculating about their mating habits. He would be able to give my quest direction, and things would become serious. All these races had been nothing but a warm-up.

We waited, in front of each other. The sand turned to glass, prickling my feet.

"Come to my place," he said. "I want to show you something." #

Dan's room had a view of the sea. I stepped inside and almost fell out again through the window. Plastic starfish stuck to the walls. Everything was made of plastic or glass, and smelled of sea.

I dropped my backpack and slid off my shoes.

"Have a seat," he said. I sat down on the bed. He pulled a drawer from underneath his desk, sat down on a swivel chair, and leaved through pieces of paper

and photos. Two computers stood on his desk. The screensavers bubbled and deflated in slow motion. I wanted to turn on the light, but I couldn't see a switch.

"Here," he said. "Arbies."

"Arbies?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

He held up a letter-sized photograph.

The photo showed a group of people who posed like circus acrobats, all knotted together. A man in a pear costume lifted a woman in a mermaid costume. Three pink tutu men stood in the front, hands around each other's hips, with an expression that asked whether the photo was done yet. Everyone in the group, except the mermaid, wore running shoes.

On top of the photo, it said, *Running Beauties - Chasing You Down!* Running Beauties. R-B's. Arbies. On the bottom were an address and phone number. The middle pink tutu man – was it my father? I squinted. Impossible to tell. The only light came from the sunset now.

Dan turned around on his swivel chair. I stood up, reached out, and tousled his hair. He inhaled and tilted his face, and the light picked out his beard stubbles before he dipped back into shadow.

"I got this from a crazy guy," he said. "He was looking for his daughter. I had never heard of her. He acted as if I were a criminal. Later, I found this in my mailbox." He reached for the photo and turned it around. Someone had written on the back.

"I think he meant it as a message for me, in case I change my mind," he said. *My daughter, Carol Kruger, I read. Please ask her to come home.*

This Really Happened, I have Proof (Notebooks)

A woman named Bridget answered the door at Arbies. I had called ahead, and she had invited me without much fuss. Bridget's skin looked like fine, oiled leather. She had white teeth and a dancer's body, and she wore her hair in two grey braids that fell to her thighs. A lapel pin in the shape of a starfish gathered the scarf around her neck.

"Welcome to the perfect world," she said. Everything looked metallic: the sky, the red soil, the cacti. The land sprang to life at the mere hint of irrigation, and dried out just as fast.

"It never rains here," Bridget said. "And we hardly drink."

The house of the Running Beauties was a Mikado structure of pastel-colored wooden beams and cathedral-style windows. It balanced on the edge of a cliff above the ocean.

"There's a switchback path down, if you know where to look," she said. "We also have trails that go up into the mountains. Run with us tonight. Running is the beginning of everything."

The hallway was lined with shoe racks containing running shoes of all sizes, made of technical fiber, cotton, lace, velvet, leather, and dried grass. Pagodas of running shoes were growing in every corner, on the mantelpieces, and the windowsills.

"The others should be back soon," Bridget said.

We sat down at an oval table in a pentagonal room with four windows. You could see the ocean and horizon through each, and I wondered how this was possible. Bridget shoved a bowl of nuts and raisins towards me. I picked up a raisin and contemplated its wrinkles.

"I'm so sorry to hear your father passed."

I played with the golden elbows of cashews, and the dried blood of cranberries.

"Did he live here?" I asked.

"I don't recall hearing his name. But that doesn't mean he wasn't here."

"What about Carol Kruger," I said. "Is she here?"

"I don't think so."

The sunlight burned through the windows.

"What kind of organization are you?" I asked. The handful of nuts inside my fist started moving, like bugs.

"We're a charity," Bridget said. Honey, she said. Relax.

Eat.

Lie down. It's fine.

Arbies runners raised money, Bridget told me. They ran so AIDS patients could afford live-in nurses, cancer patients could afford wigs, and blind people could afford a dog. They didn't run for any particular group; they ran to even the scales. "Think of us as a meta-charity, honey." Two women with blonde hair, who wore

grey cardigans and lunched on steamed Brussels sprouts, did accounting in the attic. They used computers with big screens and ergonomic keyboards.

Every morning, when it was my turn, I walked up to the mailbox to retrieve bags of envelopes from all over the world, and brought them upstairs. In the afternoon, I stamped letters and deposited them in the mailbox. All envelopes were pink.

From my notebook:

Three steel refrigerators. Pink meat marbled with seams of fat. Glass bowls with fruit. Twenty twin beds in the basement. Memory foam pillows, down blankets, a row of lockers in the hallway. Breakfast in shifts. Dinner standing up in the doorways, holding plates with one hand and forking up food with the other. Cooking and dishwashing according to a strict schedule. Weekly grocery runs. Bathrooms further down the road in a building made out of salmon-colored tiles. Showers forceful enough to hose down a mud-encrusted car. The water tastes salty. An enormous supply of Windex, Lysol, toilet cleaner, toilet paper in the basement. A dry cleaning van picks up the dirty laundry once a week and brings back scented duffel bags filled with clean clothes.

There are three pink tutu men, strong, with large hands. They are called Pico, Dico, and Nico. They perform acrobatic tricks while running. If they have to, they carry the wands between their teeth.

There are other costume runners. A pink tube dress man and two caterpillars. They all run up and down the road, past the house, again and again, all day. They do hills on the switchbacks. A few are away at any given time, at races, at home (!), and

their beds are empty until they return and toss their backpack on the bed and lie down, glad to be back at Arbies.

It's a zero distraction athletics camp atmosphere. It must have been Dad's paradise.

The Arbie runners took me out running. I couldn't keep up for long, but this time I didn't stop and push gravel out of the way. I kept on moving. And it was fine. The weight melted off my bones. I became a little faster every day.

The pink tutu men didn't have any secrets. I could ask them anything I wanted. They sat on fold out chairs at the kitchen table, cleaning their shoes with toothbrushes. I mixed them sports drink out of powder and filtered water and asked:

Why do you do this? Because it's fun.

What are the wands for? They do the trick.

What trick? The trick.

I don't get it. Yes, you do.

Are you real? Of course. We snore, don't we?

Did you know my father? Like you do.

Why did he die? Heart failure.

Once, I found a pink tutu man –Nico, the youngest, who had a stutter– sitting on my bed. He turned the pages of my notebook with one hand, and adjusted one of his shoulder straps with the other.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He dropped the book on the pillow. "N-nothing," he stuttered. "I was curious."

"About me?"

He got up and raced past me.

"Two quick miles," he called over his shoulder. By then, my response was automatic. I always wore running shoes, a pair Bridget had given me, and ran after him without thinking. By then, I was fast enough to keep up.

Occasionally, a runner would leave Arbies for good. They took off their running shoes and put on the street shoes they had kept inside their lockers, packed their suitcases, and left. At breakfast, we observed him or her walking down the road. We waved in silence or raised a spoon. We never commented on the life they returned to.

Then, with all the mailbox rituals every day, I wanted to send Abe and his mother a letter, and found I couldn't remember his address. I couldn't remember my own address, either. I found my wallet in my backpack and pried out my driver's license. Yes, that was my address. How could I have forgotten? I rehearsed it in my head. I covered it with my hand, and forgot it immediately.

"I'm losing my memories!" I said. "Did this happen to my father?"

"No!" Bridget said. "I don't know what happened to him!" She sounded as upset as I was. "Honey. Maybe you should go home." I didn't want to leave. "Sleep on it," Bridget said. It sounded like a line she had picked up somewhere. She wasn't used to taking charge. At Arbies, things happened. No interference was necessary.

One of the accountants made an ID card with my name and address for me. She punched a hole in the corner of the ID card and attached it to a bracelet she strapped around my wrist.

Echo of my steps on asphalt. Taste of stamp glue. Creak of the mailbox hatch. Buzz of the printer in the attic. Red dust on the switchbacks.

Being a runner. Lining up in the morning at a trailhead. Eucalyptus leaves, bird song, shade settling on our shoulders, and the first deep breath. My elbows in the same angles at theirs, my legs in the same rhythm. We chase our shadows. I look for my clumsy shape to stand out, and the only thing that marks me is the black square plastic ID dangling from my arm.

At night, in the hallway. I'm on my knees. I press a plastic handle covered with slime against the right side of my face. The handle beeps. I'm holding a phone. I don't remember a voice, but I'm talking, talking.

I walk from the bath/ shower building to Bridget's Mikado house, barefoot, a towel folded over my arm. The baby-blue van of the dry cleaner comes from the other direction and stops next to me. The windows are open. A country tune tells me not to worry.

"How are you doing," the driver says.

I look ahead at the house. The bags of dirty laundry have been picked up.

"Not too bad," I say. The sun warms my shoulders. It is always warm here, and very cold at night.

"I'm a bit thirsty," I say.

"You're not from here, are you?"

I hug the towel to my chest.

"No," I say. "I think not."

"You look lost." He has a moustache, like Rod Dixon and Bikila. He stops the engine of his car and gets out. He is a tall man.

"You remind me of someone," he says. "What's your name?"

He looks so normal. Graying hair, young skin, big Adam's apple. At first I think he takes my hand. Then I realize he only lifts it so he can see the tag on my bracelet.

"I think we should get you out of here, Sarah MacGuire," he says.

"I'm not sure," I say.

He pulls at the tag, still holding my wrist with his other hand. It feels as if he is tugging at my insides. I remove my hand from his, and my life becomes light again, made of technical fabric, and smelling of clean sweat and soap.

"I want to stay here," I say.

"I'll be back," he says. "In case you change your mind."

It is cool inside the house. I go to the basement. It is cold and quiet down here, and musty, as if the place had been deserted for a long time. My notebook lies on my pillow. I pick it up at the spine, and it falls open and spills its contents: E-tickets, business cards, race flyers, race numbers, and a long, narrow sheet of paper that isn't mine. I want to pick it up and read it when I notice the back of a photo, blank except for a few words:

"My daughter, Carol Kruger. Please ask her to come home."

I rush to the accountants' room. The accountants sit opposite each other and type. Bridget sits on the floor with her legs crossed, a stack of pink envelopes to her left, and a heap of folded pink cards to her right. The sun illuminates her pearly kneecaps. She dabs a finger against her tongue and picks up a card.

"Who are you?" I ask her.

"What?"

"Are you Carol Kruger?"

"No!" she says. Her teeth are translucent at the edges, as if she's been undernourished as a child. "What's your name, then?" I ask.

"Honey, it's Bridget..." Her lips tried to form words, but nothing comes. I know how she feels. I can't remember my name, either. It's right there on the card dangling from my wrist, but unless I reach for the card and turn it around, I will never remember. I want to stay here, but I can't. I can't live without my own name. No one can live without a name. If I stay here, I'll die.

I'm itching to read the damn ID tag, but I won't. I have to remember on my own.

The accountants look at each other. They know I have figured it out.

I pull myself up on one of the accountants' desks. It's hard. No one helps me; the three of them just stare. When I stand upright, my scalp comes off. An air pocket is growing between my skin and my skeleton, and the air pocket is spreading. Now my face lifts, the back of my head, the neck. The air pocket runs down my chest and along my spine, over my hips and down my legs. I don't look. When I'm all surrounded by air, I expect to collapse, but instead – after a moment of panic, when I

want to touch my face to make sure I'm still there – I feel normal again. A woman in a home office. Nothing to see here.

She's standing behind me: the runner whose shadow I borrowed. She turns and leaves. She can't help me now.

The dry cleaning man will help me.

What about my car?

My thoughts are sticky.

My father. He has been one of the runners who left. He has made it home, not in his civilian garb but in his pink tutu, all the way across the country, all the way to my doorstep. What a guy.

My Mother

"Here is the thing, Sarah." She put her water bottle on the table and closed her eyes, the way she used to before a race or a hard workout. Even her eyelids were perfectly still. When she continued, her voice was deeper than before.

"I am telling you this because I love you. You have to understand that your father wasn't perfect. He was a runner. He tried to be a coach, but in his heart of hearts, he was a runner. He ran away. That's what he did. He ran away from his family, and he started wearing a costume. These are the facts. This is what we have to work with."

I had arrived the night before. The dry cleaning van had dropped me off in front of my mother's new house. The address matched, but I didn't recognize it: Yellow bricks, a pine tree that almost swallowed the porch, a rusted mailbox, and an

almost invisible dirt path through a patch of bumpy lawn. I had seen it before, but I hadn't bothered to remember.

My mother opened the front door and ran towards me. I hadn't seen her run in ages. She was still fast. She punched me in the belly with a sharp fist, and hugged me as if she wanted to strangle me. "Where have you been?" She only wore pajamas, and I could feel her wiry arms, her ribs, and her small breasts as she shuddered against me like a squirrel.

"It's okay, Mom," I said. "It's okay. I found out about Dad."

She took a step back, slapped me in the face, and started crying.

She turned around and limped back to the door.

Inside, she let me hear it. She had waited, waited for my call. "What were you doing out there?" She had tried to reach me. If I hadn't called her that night –

"Come on," she said. "Spit it out!" We sat in the kitchen, on a table just big enough for two, and she let me have it. I didn't get a word in. I had stories of Arbies, and the Mikado house, and the eucalyptus trees, and the pink tutu men, and my mother asked me about sex and drugs and speeding tickets.

In between, she stood up and opened the fridge. Bottles cluttered. She took out a bottle of milk and a bowl of strawberries and put both on the table.

"Sorry, no cake," she said. "Or bread. Oh, hell." She sat down again and rubbed her face like my father had during our kitchen nights. Her lips were narrow, her lower arms white and sinewy. I could see her flat nipples underneath her shirt. She had always been like this. My life had always been like this. I had never noticed until now.

"I'm okay," I said. "Really."

"Abe and his mother were worried about you."

I started picking up the strawberries, and she watched me.

"Fine. Let's talk tomorrow," she said.

The next morning she wore her hair in a tight bun, track-style. She had put on make-up.

I had made the mistake of looking in a mirror before crashing. Choppy hair, dead skin, bloodshot eyes, yellow teeth. Clothes caked to my body. It had been too long since the showers at Arbies. I closed my eyes and thought of the scent of the dry cleaning van, and the warm, fluffy bags of clean laundry. Then I stepped into the shower and started scrubbing.

The next morning, my mother started to talk to me. "Here is the thing, Sarah," she said, and continued to tell me that she loved me, and that my father wasn't perfect...

I tried to listen, but I had already prepared my own speech. I mustn't mess this up. She didn't see me as qualified to talk about pink tutu men. My father was not a topic she enjoyed. But she and my father had been close once, closer than I had ever been to anyone. I wanted to show her I understood now: How she had felt in Beijing, before she tore a muscle. How much it sucks to be stuck inside yourself. Why my father had stopped making the Speedsters chase each other, and instead became a different kind of coach. Runners and pink tutu men. It all made sense now. We could all be free.

As it turned out, she simply tore me apart.

"Do you remember what you told me about your last race?" I said.

Confused stare, but still benign, willing to go there with me.

"You weren't the only one who met a pink tutu man. They're everywhere."

Leaning back into her seat. Very still.

"I tried to find them." My voice dropped to a whisper. "I think Dad was one of them."

A vein zigzagged down her brow, and her jaw muscles shifted. The new thing about it: Her reaction had nothing to do with what I said. It was about me. She stared at me, Sarah MacGuire, as if I had the power to hurt her.

So I tried to be gentle. I painted a nice picture with an extremely silky brush for her, making sure not to mess up the detail: Dan's futuristic tube dress. The beach and the ocean that smelled like pine needles. The black-and-white photo of Arbies. Bridget's long, grey braid. Nico's little stutter. How I became a runner and lost my name.

She let me talk. I found this encouraging.

"Some of them go back home and visit," I said. "Dad came back home. And I did."

She nodded. *Go on.* I should have known that the quieter she is, the more dangerous she will be.

"Dad has become a spirit," I said. "He had a magic wand. He and the others, they appear at decision time, like witnesses. It's like you said. They weight comes off your shoulder. *You voted.* It's official. But in order to be who they are, they have to

leave their old life behind and live somewhere else. That's what happened to Dad. That's why he ran away."

She leaned forward and looked me up and down. The vein had disappeared.

"All right," she said. "I think I should tell you now."

Of course. I had dished out this story, this big, big miracle, and she was the one with the real news. She had waited all this time.

"Your father..." she stopped. "Your father was sick. At first he couldn't sleep anymore, then he stopped talking. Finally, he wandered off at night. In the end, he didn't recognize me. He was severely depressed."

Now it was my turn to nod. *Go on.*

"We agreed that he should go home for a while. Being out there has always been good for him. But this time, he didn't get better." "What do you mean?"

"He'd been living with his parents at first, and then with an uncle who has a resort of some kind, and they moved. I'm not sure. He didn't want you to know. And I didn't want you to know either."

"But he wrote..."

"The unicorn cards." She smiled for a moment. "I talked to a counselor about them. I wasn't sure whether it was good for you that he sent them. But she said it was. You have your own relationship with him, she said, and I had to trust it. She also said you needed your own place, and that you needed to get out. But now I think..."

Her words were too far away for me to comprehend. For now, I was simply miserable. My mother had lied to me. She had lied to me for two years.

"I think you need to be careful," she said.

This didn't make sense at all.

"Why?" I asked.

"I always worried about you," she said. "You were so quiet. So desperate." Aha, I thought. I was desperate. *I was desperate.*

"I told my self to give it time. I told myself, you're not your father. And you aren't. Of course you aren't. But now, after what you just told me..."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'm worried about you. As the child of someone with mental disorder, you are at an increased risk..."

I stood up. I had to move or I would have thrown up. She looked up at me, about as intimidating as a gymnast with her neat little bun and her marzipan face.

"You scared me," she said. "I'm sorry, but you scared me so much. When you called me that night, you didn't make sense," she said. "You sounded like Abe when he's all over the place—"

"I'm fine," I said. "I travelled across the country."

"Honey," she said. "You were a two-day drive from here. There are no eucalyptus trees where you travelled. There is no sea. There's only a river, a couple of cabins, and a youth hostel..."

It was pointless. My lips and gums were hurting, and my body was squirming and wanting to get out and get away from her voice. I walked away and picked up my backpack. Good thing I hadn't unpacked. My toothbrush, that was all. I put on my shoes.

"I'm only saying you should talk to someone," she said.

There will be no official record of what I did next. No camera was there to record how I tied my shoelaces and picked my jacket from the coat rack. I would have deserved an enormous, shiny Most Excellent Restraint trophy on a marble base for holding back the following: You call me crazy. Because running with broken bones is not crazy. Training so much you need 5000 calories a day is not crazy. Running in a bucket of water because your bones can't handle the pounding is not crazy. Buying a machine that makes your bones grow back faster so you can break them again is so sane.

My mother sniffed and started losing it. "He was beautiful," she said, her mouth raw, and her face smaller than ever. "He was beautiful, but he broke. I don't want you to break."

Whatever. I didn't say anything, except one thing, when I was almost out of the door.

"Thanks for being honest," I said to her. "I didn't know you saw me like that."

What I keep to Myself

After a minute or two, the shock and adrenaline started leaking out, and the pain had room to spread. My mother had punched me good. My eye sockets burned, and my nose felt like a stuck-on ball of pain. My gums were bleeding. She had caught my by surprise, and I hadn't had time to put my fists up. Now it was time to hurt. So she thought I was crazy. And not only now, at this moment – she had worried about me *all the time*.

Strange how, not long ago, this would have destroyed me. I had spent years cowering in the dark, afraid of being exposed as a flawed specimen. I had hidden and hoped no one would notice the odd rhythm of my breath. Now I knew better. Going crazy – being sane: It was a matter of giving in or holding off. Here, at the corner, stood Pete, Abe's poor, flat, dusty maroon car. Two memories lived in my mind: The ride back in the warm, scented laundry van, country music, a crocheted pillow in my neck, and the hour-long zombification drive with my hands glued to the wheel, stopping only to pee and throw away my smelly running shoes. For now, both were true. For now.

No, what hurt me was to know that, *all this time*, she had seen me as a liability. *At risk*. She had been waiting, waiting for me to show the first signs of mental rot. I had never had a chance. And to think that I had pitied her.

The convenience store was closed. I stared through the storefront window, at the shelves with soup cans and pasta and diapers, the empty meat and cheese counter, and the scales in the corner, next to the broken cappuccino maker.

This is it, I thought. If I never get out of here again, this is it. Behind that glass is my life. A reaction. A reaction please. Is this horrible? Exhilarating?

It was Fitzgerald, the crow, who finally made it all right. There he sat, on his pyramid of soup cans, his feathers dusted off and shiny, and his glass eyes giving a sparkle of mischief. It was a weird shop run by two strange people and an exhausted mother, but you had to admit: Fitzgerald was the finest piece of taxidermy in town.

I sat down on the bench in front of the shop and opened my backpack. I took out my notebook and searched for the long, narrow sheet of paper with Nico's poem.

This was true, too: I had had my encounter with a pink tutu man. My father had run with me that last night. There had been no stardust when he waved his magic wand at me, no electric shock or quake or thunderclap. Only his smile and his death.

We, the Pink Tutu Men

Pick your story.

O.k., I was doing the truffle shuffle. My quads were screaming, and my hamstrings had died But I thought I could wing it until that guy in the pink tutu overtook me

That was the last straw

If a guy in a tutu

With pink dyed running shoes (yes, I had to check) overtakes me

It's over.

I walked

I dropped out, I'm done

I'm dog food.

Or:

He waved an ice cream stick with a silver star

And I knew I could do it

I ran Boston, New York, and Comrades (a long time ago)

No one waves anything at me during the last miles of a marathon

So I picked it up

And finished strong

You want to see my medal?

It's right over here, let me get it, it's no trouble at all

Whether you collapse on the curb or find another gear

Whether you finish now or later

We, the pink tutu men, approve