

New York Times bestselling author

jason **reynolds**



PATINA

PATTY AIN'T **NO** JUNK.

PATINA

TRACK: BOOK 2

jason reynolds

A Caitlyn Dlouhy Book



ATHENEUM BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division

1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

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Also available in an Atheneum Books for Young Readers hardcover edition

Book design by Debra Sfetsios-Conover and Irene Metaxatos

The text for this book was set in ITC Stone Serif Std.

Manufactured in the United States of America

1019 OFF

First Atheneum Books for Young Readers paperback edition October 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Names: Reynolds, Jason, author.

Title: Patina / Jason Reynolds.

Description: First edition. | New York : Atheneum Books for Young Readers, [2017] | Series: Track ; 2 | "Caitlyn Dlouhy Books." | Summary: "A newbie to the track team, Patina 'Patty' Jones must learn to rely on her family and teammates as she tries to outrun her personal demons."— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017018004 | ISBN 9781481450188 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781481450195 (paperback) | ISBN 9781481450201 (eBook)

Subjects: | CYAC: Running—Fiction. | Track and field—Fiction. | Stress (Physiology)—

Fiction. | Family problems—Fiction. | Diabetes—Fiction. | African Americans—Fiction. |

BISAC: JUVENILE FICTION / Sports & Recreation / General. | JUVENILE FICTION / Family /

Adoption. | JUVENILE FICTION / Social Issues / Friendship.

Classification: LCC PZ7.R33593 Pat 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017018004>

For those who've been
passed the baton
too young



TO DO: Everything (including forgetting about the race and braiding my sister's hair)

AIN'T NO SUCH thing as a false start. Because false means fake, and ain't no fake starts in track. Either you start or you don't. Either you run or you don't. No in-between. Now, there can be a wrong start. That makes more sense to me. Means you just start at the wrong time. Just jump early and break out running with no one there running with you. No competition except for your own brain that swears there's other people on your heels. But ain't nobody there. Not for real. Ain't no chaser. That's what they really mean when they say false start. A real start at the wrong time.

And at the first meet of the season, nobody knew this more than Ghost.

Before the race, me and everybody else stood on the sidelines, clapping and hyping Ghost and Lu up as they took their marks. This was of course after they had already gassed each other up, talking to each other like there was no one else on the track but them. Funny how they went from mean-muggin' each other when they first met, to becoming all buddy-buddy like they their own two-man gang or something. Lu and Ghost—sticking together like glue. Ha! Glue! Ghost and Lu, Glue. Get it? That could be their corny crew name. Lost would also work. Matter fact, there was a moment where I thought that name might even be more fitting. Especially after what Ghost did.

See, at first, I thought he'd timed it perfectly. I thought Ghost pushed off from the line at the exact moment the gun went off, as if he just knew when it was coming. Like he could feel it on the inside of him or something. But he didn't hear the second shot. Well, I take that back. Of course he heard it. It was a loud *boom*. It was impossible not to hear it. But he didn't know it meant that he'd jumped too early, that he'd false started. I mean, this was his first race, so he had no clue that that second shot meant to

stop running, and start over. So . . . he didn't.

He ran the entire hundred meters. Didn't know that people weren't cheering him on, but were yelling for him to pull up, to go back to the starting line. So when he got to the finish line, he threw his hands up in victory and turned around with one of them million-toothed smiles until he noticed all the other runners—his competition—were still up at the top of the track. He looked out into the crowd. Everybody, laughing. Pointing. Shaking their heads, while Ghost dropped his. Stared at the black tar, his chest like someone blowing up a balloon inside him; then letting the air out, then blowing it back up, then letting the air out. I was afraid that balloon was gonna bust. That Ghost would burst open like he used to do when he first joined the team. And I could tell by the way he was chewing on the side of his jaw that he wanted to, or maybe just keep running, off the track, out of the park, all the way home.

Coach walked over to him, whispered something in his ear. I don't know what it was. But it was probably something like, "It's okay, it's okay, settle down, you're still in it. But if you do it again, you're disqualified." Nah, knowing Coach, it was probably something a little more deep, like . . . I don't know. I can't even

think of nothing right now, but Coach was full of deep. Whatever it was, Ghost lifted his head and trotted back to the line, where Lu was waiting with his hand out for a five. Ghost was still out of breath, but there was no time for him to catch it. He had to get back down on his mark. Get ready to run it all over.

The starter held the gun in the air again. My stomach flipped over again. The man pulled the trigger again. *Boom!* again. And Ghost took off. Again. It was almost like his legs were sticks of dynamite, and the first run was just the fuse being lit, and now, the tiny fire had gotten to the blowup part. And let me tell you, Ghost . . . blew up. Busted wide open in the best way. I mean, the dude exploded down the line in a blur, even faster this time, his silver shoes like sparks flicking up off the track.

First race. First place.

Even after a false start.

And if a false start means a real start at the wrong time—the wrong time being too early—then I must've had a false finish, which also ain't a fake finish, but a real finish, just . . . too late. Make sense?

Just in case it don't, let me explain.

My race was up next. And here's the thing, I've been running the eight hundred for three years straight. It's

my race. I have a system, a way of running it. I come off the block strong and low and by the time I'm straight up, my stride is steady, but I always allow myself to drop back a little. You know, keeping it cool for the first lap. Pace. That's where eight-hundred runners blow it. They start out too fast and be rigged by the second lap. I seen a lot of girls get roasted out there, showboatin' on that first four hundred. But I knew better. I knew the second four hundred was the kicker. What I didn't know, though, was just how fast the girls in this new league were. What kinda shape they were in. So when the gun blew, and we took off, I realized that the pace I had to keep just to stay with the pack was faster than I was used to. But, of course, I'm thinking, these girls are stupid and are gonna be tired in twenty seconds.

In thirty seconds.

In forty seconds.

Never happened, and instead it ended up being me saying to myself, *Oh God, I'm tired. How am I tired?* And as we rounded into the final two hundred meters, I had to dig deep and step it up. So I turned on the jets.

Here's how it went.

Cornrows, Low-Cut, Ponytail, and Puny-Tail in front of me. *Chop 'em down, Patty. Push, push, push, breathe.* Cornrows is on my side now. The crowd is

screaming the traditional chant when someone is getting passed—*Wooooop! Wooooop! Wooooop!* Push. Push. Cornrows is toast. One hundred meters to go. Mouth wide open. Eyes wide open. Stride wide open. Chop 'em down, Patty. Arms pumping, whipping the air out of my way like water. Low-Cut is slowing up. Her little pea-head's bobbling like it could snap right off. She's tired. Finally. *Wooooop! Wooooop!* Got her. Two more to go. Ponytail can feel me coming. She can probably hear my footsteps over the screaming crowd. She knows I'm close, and then she makes the biggest mistake ever—the one thing every coach tells you to never do—she looked back. See, when you look back, it automatically knocks your stride off and it gets you messed up mentally. And once Ponytail looked over her shoulder, the *woooops* started back up like a siren. *Wooooop! Wooooop! Wooooop!* Fifty meters. That's right, I'm coming. Chop 'em down, Patty. I'm coming. I could see Puny-Tail just ahead of her, that little twist of hair in the back of her head like a snake tongue. She was running out of breath. I could see that by the way her form had broken down. Ponytail was too. We all were. And even worse for me, we were also running out of track.

I got Ponytail by a nose—second place—then collapsed, people cheering all around me, jumping up

and down in the stands quickly becoming a wavy blur of color as the tears rose. Second? Stupid second place? Ugh. No way was I going to cry. Trust me, I wanted to, water pricking at my eyelids, but no way. I wanted to kick something, I was so mad! Coach Whit came over and helped me up, and once I was standing, I yanked away from her and limped over to the bench. My legs were burning and cramping, but I wanted to kick something anyway. Maybe kick the bench over. Kick those stupid orange slices Lu's mother brought. Anything. But instead I just sat down and didn't say a word for the rest of the meet. Yes, I'm a sore loser, if that's what you wanna call it. To me, I just like to win. I only wanna win. Anything else is . . . false. Fake.

But real.

So real, I didn't even want to talk about it on the way to church the next day. Not with no one. Not even with God. I'd spent all morning braiding Maddy's hair the same way Ma used to braid mine when I was little. Only difference is Ma got fat fingers, and used to be braiding like she was trying to strip my edges or make me bald. Talkin' 'bout, "Gotta make it tight so it don't come loose." Right. But I don't even do Maddy's that tight, and I can knock out a whole head full of hair in half an hour if she sits still. Which she never does.

"How many more?" Maddy whined, squirming on the floor in front of me.

"I'm almost done. Just chill out, so I can . . ." I picked up the can of beads and shook them in her ear like one of them Spanish shaker things. And just like that, she calmed down and let me tilt her head forward so I could braid the last section, the bit of curls tightly wound at the base of her neck. I dipped my finger in the gunk on the back of my hand, then massaged it into Maddy's scalp. Then I stroked grease into the leftover bush-ball, tugging it straight, then letting it go, watching it shrink back into dark brown cotton candy.

"What colors you want?" I asked, separating the hair into the three parts.

"Ummmm . . ." Maddy put a finger to her chin, acting like she thinking. I say acting, because she knew what color she wanted. She picked the same one every week. Matter fact, there was only one color in the can.

"Red," we both said at the same time, me, of course, with a little more pepper and a little less pep. Maddy tried to whip around and give me a funny face, but I was mid-braid.

"Uh-uh. Stay still."

Then came the beading. Today, thirty braids. So, three red beads on each braid. Ninety beads. I used tiny

bits of aluminum foil on the ends to keep the beads from slipping off, even though I knew they would anyway. But who got time to use those little rubber bands? Not me. And definitely not Maddy.

When we finished, Maddy did what she always did—ran to the bathroom. I followed her, like I always did, and lifted her up so she could see herself in the mirror. She smiled, her mouth like a piano with only one black key, one front tooth missing. Then Maddy ran back to the living room and blew a kiss at a picture propped up on the table next to the TV—the same picture every time—of me at her age, six, with a big cheese and a missing front tooth and braids, red beads, aluminum foil on the ends.

I do Maddy's hair every Sunday for two reasons. The first is because Momly can't do it. If it was up to her, Maddy's hair would be in two Afro-puffs every day. Either that, or Momly would've shaved it all off by now. It's not that she don't care. She does. It's just that she don't know what to do with hair like Maddy's—like ours. Ma do, but Momly . . . nope. She never had to deal with nothing like it, and there ain't no rule book for white people to know how to work with black hair. And her husband, my uncle Tony, he ain't no help. Ever since they adopted us, every time I talk about

Maddy's hair, Uncle Tony says the same thing—just let it rock. Like he's gonna sit in the back of Maddy's class and stink-face all the six-year-old bullies in barrettes. Right. But luckily for everybody, especially Maddy, I know what I'm doing. Been a black girl all my life.

The other reason I always do Maddy's hair on Sundays is because that's when we see Ma, and she don't wanna see Maddy looking like "she ain't never been nowhere." So after Maddy's hair is done, we get dressed. As in, dressed up. All the way up. Maddy puts on one of her church dresses, white patent leather shoes that most people only wear on Easter Sunday, but for us—for Ma—every Sunday is like Easter Sunday. I put on a dress too, run a comb through my hair until it cooperates. Ugly black ballerina flats because Ma don't want me "looking fast in the house of the Lord." Then Momly drives us across town to Barnaby Terrace, my old neighborhood.

Barnaby Terrace is . . . fine. I don't really know what else to say about it except for the fact that there's nothing really to say about it. Ain't nobody rich, that's for sure. But ain't nobody really poor, neither. Everybody's just regular. Regular people going to regular jobs having regular kids who go to regular schools and grow up to be regular people with regular jobs, and on and on. And I

guess everything was pretty regular about me, too, until six years ago. Follow me. I'd just turned six, and me and my dad were having one of our famous invisible cupcake parties. Kinda like how little girls on old TV shows be having tea parties, but you know how it don't ever really be tea in the cups? Like that. Except I didn't have a tea set, and my mom wouldn't let us use her real tea-cups, which were really just random coffee mugs, plus my dad always said tea don't even taste good enough to pretend to drink it. He also said "tea" and "eat" are made of the same letters anyway, so pretending to eat was pretty much the same as pretending to drink. And what better thing to pretend to eat than cupcakes. And that's what we always had—imaginary cupcakes.

But on this night, my mother cut the party short because it was a school night, plus she was pregnant with Maddy at the time and needed my father to massage her feet. So he whispered in my ear, "Sleep tight, sweet Pancake, your mama and the Waffle need me." Then he kissed me good night—first on the forehead, then on one cheek, then on the other cheek. I don't know what happened next. My guess is that after rubbing Ma's feet, he kissed her good night too. And Maddy, the "Waffle" who was probably being all fidgety in Ma's stomach. I bet Dad smooched right on the

belly button, then rolled over and went to sleep.

But he never woke up.

Like . . . ever.

It was crazy. And if we had been allowed to drink pretend tea from my mother's real cups, they all would've been shattered the next morning after she woke me up, her face wet with tears, and blurted, "Something's happened." I would've smashed each and every one of them cups on the floor. And I would've smashed more of them two years later when my mother had two toes cut off her right foot. And six months after that, when she had that whole foot cut off. And six months after that—three years ago—when my mother had both her legs chopped off, which, I'm telling you, would've left the whole stupid cabinet empty. Broken mugs everywhere. Nothing left to drink from.

But I didn't. Instead I just swallowed it all. And wished this was all some kind of invisible, pretend . . . something. But it wasn't.

And just so you don't get the wrong idea, it's not like my mom just wanted her legs cut off. She got the sugar. Well, it's really a disease called diabetes, but she calls it the sugar, so I call it the sugar, plus I like that better than diabetes because diabetes got the word "die" in it, and I hate that word. The sugar broke Ma's

lower extremities, which is how doctors say legs. It just went crazy all in her body. Stopped the blood flow to her feet. I used to have to rub and grease them at night, just like my dad used to, and it was like putting lotion on two tree trunks. Dry and cracked. Swollen and dark like she'd been standing in coal. But at some point she just couldn't feel them no more, and I went from moisturizing them to trying to rub them back to life. And after that, they were basically . . . I guess the best way to explain it is to just say . . . dead. Her feet had died. Like I said, I hate that word, but ain't no way else to say it. And I guess death can travel, can spread like a fire in the body, so the doctors had to go ahead and cut her legs off—they call it "amputate," which for some reason makes me think of something growing, not something being chopped—just above the knee to keep more of her from dying.

Maddy's only six now, and ever since she was born I'd been helping out the best I could with her. But with Ma losing her toes and feet, helping out became straight-up taking care of. I'm talking about keeping lists in my head of things I had to take care of.

TO DO: Make sure Maddy's bathed.

TO DO: Make sure Maddy's dressed.

TO DO: Make sure Maddy's fed.

TO DO: Everything.

But after Ma lost her legs, my godparents—my dad's brother, Tony, and his wife, Emily—stepped in and took over as our “sole guardians,” which, the first time I heard it, I thought was “soul guardians,” which, I guess, is just as good. Kinda like guardian angels. I bet Uncle Tony and Auntie Emily—who Maddy used to call Mama Emily, which became Momly—had no idea that when they said they would be our godparents they were inheriting all this drama. I bet they just thought they'd have to give us gifts on random days—days that wasn't our birthday or Christmas. Slip us ten-dollar bills just because. Stuff like that. Not take care of us, all the way. That's . . . a lot. But they always acted like they were cool with it—like this is what they signed up for—and we grateful, even though I still gotta look out for Maddy because, you know . . . I just do. I still keep a list in my brain. Plus, Momly can't do black hair for nothing.

Why am I telling you this long story?

Oh, I remember.

Because, Sundays. On Sundays, like I said, Maddy's hair gotta be right. For Ma.



TO DO: Dance like my mother's watching
(or like I'm killing roaches)

ONCE WE GET to Ma's house—our old . . . other house—it goes the same way every time. Maddy jumps out and runs to the door, her red beads clacking with every step, the foil on the ends glinting like each braid was a Fourth of July sparkler. I jump out behind her.

"Only ring it once," I tell her, just because ringing anybody's doorbell ten million times is one of Maddy's favorite things to do. But with Ma, a person who can't walk, it comes across as a hurry up, which is rude.

"I know, I know," Maddy says, acting like she wasn't about to go hammer-time on the doorbell.

"Coming!" Ma's muffled voice comes through the wooden door. By the time she opens it, Momly has parked the car and is standing with us, still rubbing sleep off her face, dressed in scrubs and those weird Wiffle-ball shoes that look too uncomfortable to walk in. But that's Momly.

"Praise the Lord," Ma sings, wheeling the chair back to give us enough space to come inside. Maddy gives the first big hug. She always does, and Ma receives it as if she'd just caught a wedding bouquet.

"Maddy, my Waffle." Big smile. "Girl, you get bigger every time I see you. And prettier."

"But you just saw me last week."

"Yep, and you bigger and prettier," Ma says, beaming. It's the same thing every week. You would think they'd switch it up, but they don't. It's a routine we all need, I guess. Something to remind us that even though life with Momly and Uncle Tony is good, Ma is who we are. Where we from. Blood.

Once Maddy gets done gushing, I bend down and give Ma a kiss on the cheek. Her skin is dry, rough on my lips, and I know better than to put any gloss on because that's also "too fast for church." She smells like flowers dipped in cake batter. And hair grease. Familiar.

"Hi, baby," she says, taking my hand.

"Hi, Ma." I squeeze. She squeezes back.

I wheel Ma—always wearing a colorful, patterned dress, her hair in fresh straw curls—out to the passenger side of the car. She can do it by herself, but I like to do it for her. Just used to it, I guess. Sometimes Momly tries to help, but she knows this is my thing. Take care of Maddy, then take care of Ma. I open the car door, put the brakes on the chair so it don't roll out from under my mother as she hoists herself up and leans into the car. Then she whips what's left of her legs in. After that, I check to make sure none of her dress is hanging out. Then I close the door and roll the wheelchair to the back of the car, where I fold it up and put it in the trunk. There's an art to this, because if I do it wrong, and the wheels of the chair bump up against me, it'll dirty up my dress, and then I'll have to hear Ma's mouth the whole way to church and back about how "cleanliness is next to godliness." But I always do it right, because ain't nobody got time for no lectures.

Next comes the pre-church small talk.

"So, how was the week?" Ma, who always immediately turns off the car radio (Momly only listens to talk talk talk anyway), asks Momly as we back out of the driveway. This, of course, is a real false start, a fake beginning to a conversation, only because Ma and

Momly speak like six thousand times a week. But this was Ma's way of opening up a discussion in a behind-the-back kind of way, to say whatever she wanted to say to me and Maddy. That way, it don't seem like Momly's a snitch. Even though I know Momly be snitching. I mean, she's our aunt. And our adopted mother. Blabbing just comes with the territory.

"Nothing crazy to report. Maddy brought home all fours in school." That was Momly's lead-in this week.

"Fours, huh? Is that like an A?" Ma asked this all the time, and I couldn't tell if she really had a hard time keeping up with the grading system of our charter school or if she was just being shady. She always called the grading system new wave, and said things like, *Charter don't mean smarter*.

Ma cracked the window to let some air in. Momly's car always smelled like a freshly scrubbed bathtub. Like . . . clean, but poisonous. Cleanliness was next to godliness, huh? So next to godliness that you might die from it. Maddy and me were used to it, but it irritated Ma every single time she was in the car.

"Yes, Ma. That's an A, remember?" Maddy piped up from the backseat. Ma didn't turn around. Just nodded.

"And Patty, well, she's really doing great on the new track team. Patty, did you bring the ribbon?" I caught

Momly's eye in the rearview mirror. She knew I ain't bring no ribbon. What I look like bringing a ribbon to church? I knew what she was doing. But if there was one thing I didn't want to talk about this Sunday, it was running. Like I said, I'm a sore loser. And petty, too. And now, instantly annoyed.

"I forgot," I said, flat.

"Well, let me tell you, Bev, she came in second in—"

"But what about grades? Is she gettin' fours or fives or whatever?" My mother cut Momly off mid-brag. Ugh. If there was a second thing I didn't want to talk about this Sunday, it was school.

"We're getting there. She's still getting used to it. Still adjusting."

The "it" they were talking about was my new school. Up until this year, I was at Barnaby Elementary, then Barnaby Middle, which are both public schools in my old neighborhood. Ma thought it would be best if I "transitioned smoothly" out of living with her by keeping me at my regular school where all my friends go. Brianna, Deena, and especially my day-one, Ashley, who everybody calls Cotton. Me and Cotton been friends since kindergarten, back when Lu Richardson's mother was our babysitter and she used to help us make up dance routines to nineties R & B. Dance routines we

still know but I don't do no more. But Cotton still does. And without me at school with her, who was gonna tape her bathroom dance-offs? Better yet, who was gonna blame her stinky farts on the boys? Who was gonna tell her that her hair is gonna be cute as soon as the curls fall? Maybe Brianna and Deena would, but that wasn't their job. It was mine. But I couldn't do it like I needed to because now I was in a different part of the city, somewhat settled into life with Uncle Tony and Momly, and going to this corny new school *they* picked—because it was a much shorter drive—over in Sunny Lancaster's neighborhood (he's another newbie on the track team). Which means, from Barnaby Terrace to Bougie Terrace. Well, the school was really called Chester Academy, which was a dead giveaway it was bougie. I mean, the cornballs who named the place thought it was too good to even be called a school. An academy? Whatever. Anyway, being at Chester was . . . different. Like, real different. First of all, we had to wear uniforms. Pleated skirts and stiff button-ups. And it was all girls, and let's just say, not too many of them had real nicknames. Not too many of them had mothers that smelled like hair grease. Hair gel? Yes. But hair grease? Nah.

"Well, I suggest she get used to it soon, or there won't

be no more running," Ma said. Momly caught my eyes again in the mirror. Winked. She knew Ma was hard on me about school, but she also knew I had to run.

As Momly pulled up in front of the church, she said what she always said every week. "Y'all say a prayer for me and your uncle."

And my mother said what she always said in response: "Lord knows y'all need it."

Momly and Uncle Tony never went to church, but when my mother made the arrangements for me and Maddy to live with them, it was under the condition that we wouldn't miss a service. A whole lot of talk about grace and faith and mercy and salvation, which, to me, all just equaled shouting, clapping, and singing in a building built to be a sweatbox. A constant reminder that all that hair combing I did before coming was a waste of time, as it was a guarantee that I'd be leaving with my curls shriveled up into a frizzy lopsided cloud.

Because of my mother's wheelchair, she had to sit in the aisle, while me and Maddy sat in a pew. And throughout the whole beginning of the service, Ma would peer down the pew to make sure we were behaving, which was hard because we always sat in the row with the stinky Thomases. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas been smelling like they just puked up mothballs for as long

as I've known them. They always took the back pew, which is where we sat, so, yeah, most of the time I was sitting real still praying to God not to let me suffocate. *Lord, please bless them with some soap. Some perfume. Anything. Make a miracle happen, or, What have I done to deserve this? Father, why hath thou forsaken me?*

But there's one part of the service where Ma always eases up on acting like a warden. And that's when Pastor Carter starts sweating, and Sister Jefferson starts laughing. See, when the sweat and laughter comes, that basically means the spirit is in the building. And when Pastor starts banging his hand on the pulpit, and throws out one of those everybody-knows-it scriptures like, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," that's the cue for the organ player, Dante, to get ready to play the happy music. Happy music sounds like the music they play at the beginning of baseball games, except sped up, and looped over and over and over again, until every lady in the church catches the spirit. And when you catch the spirit, that don't mean you reach out and grab it like it's ball or something. It's not like that. Catching the spirit is more like the spirit catching you. And when it happens, you dance. But not like *dance* dance. Not like Cotton be dancing. You dance like the church is roach infested and it's your job to step on them all. Like

you trying to put a hole in the floor. Like you trying to break the heel off your white church pumps.

And Ma loves this. She always has. But now, she can't dance. So, when she looks down the aisle during this part, it's because she wants to see me and Maddy catch the spirit. Actually, she just wants to see us do a triple-time step. See us move our legs a million miles a minute. Maddy loves it. As soon as she hears the music, she gets to bouncing around in her seat the same way she does when I'm doing her hair. Me, well, I don't ever really feel nothing. But I love my mother. So I give Maddy the look, and she stands up, shoulders rocking, silly smile smeared across her lips, but only for a second before she mimics the other "saints" and screws her face up like she just caught another whiff of the Thomases. Then I stand up. Ma rolls the wheelchair back so we have enough space to slide out of the pew without tripping or brushing against the wheels of her chair and dirtying up our holy dresses.

And once we're out, oh . . . it's party time. More like, workout time. It's like black Riverdance, or something like that. Actually, it reminds me of some of the warm-up drills Coach makes us do at practice. High knees. Footwork. And Ma loves it. But she can't fist-pump and yell, "Go, Maddy! Go, Patty! Go! Go! Go!"

in church. Not really appropriate. But what she can do is yell, "Yes, Lawd! Yessssss! Thank ya, Lawd! Thank ya!" And that's basically the same thing.

After service, Momly is always waiting for us, and I go through the same process—getting Ma in the car, the wheelchair in the trunk. The only difference is on the ride home, Ma's all high off Jesus and now ready to talk about what I'm normally doing great at, even though not so great this week. Running.

"You know I pray for you. I pray God put something special in your legs, in your muscles so you can run and not grow weary," she said, lifting a finger in the air, proud that she was able to slip a Bible verse into regular conversation, a thing she was always trying to do.

"She's really something, Bev," Momly adds. I hate when they try to make me feel better by talking around me, like I'm not right here.

I lost.

I lost, I lost, I lost.

I sit in the back, clenching my jaw. Maddy sits next to me, kicking the back of Momly's seat.

"Oh, I know she is, because she's mine." Ma turns around and this time beams at me. "And I don't make no junk."



TO DO: Introduce myself
(which I should've done a while ago)

I SHOULD PROBABLY introduce myself. My name is Patina Jones. And I ain't no junk. I also ain't no hair flipper. And most of the girls at Chester Academy are hair flippers who be looking at me like my mom some kind of junk maker. But ain't none of them got the guts to come out of their mouths with no craziness. They just turn and flip their dingy ponytails toward me like I care. Tuh. I guess it's no secret that it's never easy being the new girl. And I get to be the new girl in two different places—on the Defenders team, and at Chester. Lucky me. But at least the Defenders I can

deal with because I know, for a fact, I can run.

I've been running track for three years now, thanks to Uncle Tony. Well, not just him. It really has more to do with my mom, dad, Uncle Tony, and Maddy. My whole family. But let's just say Uncle Tony okeydoked the idea into my brain. See, it was my dad's birthday, and also a few months before my mother's legs were taken, and we were celebrating with cupcakes—real cupcakes, not pretend ones—that my mother had baked in honor of him. Yellow cake, strawberry icing, Dad's recipe. It had become a tradition that I loved, even though it always made me sad. It was really just a chance for everybody to sit around and for the old-heads to crack jokes and tell me and Maddy stories about him. Maddy never knew him. And even though I did, and I remember him—I'll never, ever forget him—there were a lot of things I just didn't know. Like how he used to make beats, and sell instrumental tapes to aspiring rappers and singers in the neighborhood. And how he used the money he made from that to put himself through culinary school to become a pastry chef. And how he loved letting me lick the batter off the spoon before baking a cake, but not nearly as much as he loved seeing me chomp down on the finished product. But apparently, according to Uncle Tony, none of

these things were as sweet to him as seeing me run.

"Your daddy called me when you took your first step," Uncle Tony, peeling the paper from his cupcake, explained in the middle of an I-remember-when session. "I answered the phone and Ronnie just started yelling, 'She did it, Toon! My baby did it!'" Toon was what my dad called Uncle Tony, a nickname from when they were kids back when Uncle Tony was obsessed with, you guessed it, cartoons.

"He sure did. He was so proud his Pancake was walking," Ma confirmed, smirking like this memory didn't bother her, even though the shine in her eyes said different. Maddy, who was too young to really care about any of this, listened in, cupcake icing smeared all over her chin. Didn't really make sense for me to wipe her mouth until she was done making a mess. The things you learn.

"But when you started running . . ." Uncle Tony shook his head. "That's when he really lost it. He'd send me videos every other day of you dashing back and forth across the room. Little fat legs just movin'! But you'd have thought you'd grown wings and started flying or something the way Ronnie was acting." Uncle Tony licked pink frosting off the cupcake and went on. "I don't know what it was about seeing you move like

that. But your daddy loved it. You were definitely his Pancake, but you were also his little sprinter."

Before then, I never even thought about running. It didn't even cross my mind, even though I used to smoke all the boys in gym class at school, including Lu, who would get all in his feelings and be almost about to cry. Lu would be so salty, frontin' like he wasn't impressed, which didn't matter because running ain't mean nothing to me anyway. Not like . . . for real. But after hearing Uncle Tony talk about my dad like that, something clicked. And one night, a few months later, after Ma's legs were gone, after a crazy moment with Maddy—and I do mean crazy—that I'll also get to later on, I asked Momly and Uncle Tony to sign me up on a team. And they jumped to it because to them, it was also a good way for me to, I guess, deal with all the changes I was going through. Balance out all the unregul . . . um, wild stuff.

So proving myself on this new track team—the Defenders—was still just . . . running. Even if it was "elite." I mean, no matter how you look at it, it's still, listen to your coaches at practice, and wait to hear the gun at the meets. Then . . . run. Nothing to it. But proving myself at Chester Academy (also "elite") was trickier—way trickier—because there were no practices,

no coaches, and no starter pistols telling me when to leave everybody in the dust. Matter fact, ain't even no dust at Chester, and running ain't nothing these girls are concerned with at all. Unless it was running their mouths.

Chester Academy is one of those schools that go from kindergarten all the way up to twelfth grade, but the different levels are broken into three wings of the building. The south wing, which was where the high school was. The east wing, which was sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. And the north wing, which was elementary, Maddy's domain. Yep, she's at Chester too, and she loves it, but that's because this the only school she's ever been at. She's never been in a school where you didn't have to wear pleated paper bags. She never went to a school with boys, and yes, boys make school really, really annoying sometimes, but they also can make it pretty fun. Or at least funny. Maddy never went to a school with mostly black kids either. She's only known life as a "raisin in milk," as my Ma puts it, where lunch is sautéed prawn, which ain't nothing but a fancy way to say cooked shrimp, and this stuff called couscous, which is basically just grits without the glob. Me, I'm a proud product of the Barnaby Terrace school system, where we ate nasty rectangle pizza (I don't miss

that part) and drank chocolate milk for lunch. Where we played pranks on people and traded candy while talking trash after school. Where we had . . . fun.

Chester . . . well, I ain't had one second of fun at Chester yet. Matter fact, when I walk down that busy hall in the morning, I keep my eyes down. Focus on the floor because I ain't got time to get stunted on by a whole bunch of rich girls whose daddies own stuff. Not like cars and clothes, though they got those, too. But stuff like . . . boats. Ain't even no water nowhere near here, but these fools got BOATS! And they don't just own their houses, they own buildings! And businesses! Not like a corner store or a weekend dinner-plate situation or nothing like that. I'm talking biz-niss-sizz. My dad . . . he wanted to start his own business, another one of those birthday stories. A cupcake shop. And maybe if he didn't . . . never wake up . . . he would've done it. But I bet he wouldn't have bought no boat. But that's who these girls' daddies were. What they did. And if your daddy got himself a boat, and a building, what does he get you? Probably some kinda crazy pet, like a horse. (Can you even teach a horse how to guard your house?)

The other thing about these girls is that it seems like they ain't never been told they can't do nothing.

Never. I mean, they be wearing full faces of makeup and everything. Do you know what my mother would do if she saw me with my whole face made up for school like I was about to go on some kinda fashion photo shoot or something? She'd probably try to run over me with that wheelchair. But here, at Chester, as long as your face is selfie-ready 100 percent of the time, you got a chance. A chance at what? Well, I don't really know. All I know is, I ain't got one.

What I got is track. I got Ghost, Sunny, and I can't believe I'm gonna say this . . . Lu. That's what I got. Who I got. So I don't really care about the selfie-readies.

Well, that's not totally true. I care a little bit.

"So . . . what y'all do this weekend?" I asked Taylor Stein, Teylor Dorsey, and Becca Broward. It was Monday, in history class, which meant it was also the second day of the worst group project of all time in the history of life. The four of us had been lumped together last Friday to start on this assignment about an important woman from the past, and in two weeks we would have to do a presentation on her. On Friday all we did was nail down who we were going to focus on. My first choice was my hero, Florence "Flo Jo" Joyner, but none of the girls in my group knew who she was. Seriously? How do you

not know one of the flyest runners to ever take a lap? There was a woman named Madeline Manning, who was probably the best American eight-hundred-meter runner, and that's my race, but still, Flo Jo was it. Plus, those nails . . . She looked like she raced during the day and was in a singing group at night.

So, anyway, then I tossed out my second choice, which was Harriet Tubman, who to me, was also a pretty good suggestion. Running from slavery and then coming back all those times to free everybody else—like a relay through the Underground Railroad—and Uncle Tony said she might be the new face of the twenty-dollar bill. That's major. But the girls weren't feeling that, either. And these are the moments I miss not going to school with Cotton, because she would've been like, "Yo, you know how crazy it would be to see my face on money? Like a hundred-dollar bill? I'd be framed in every corner store in the hood—your girl, lookin' like money, on money!" But that's not how the conversation went in my history group. Instead it was all, Harriet Tubman's just too serious. So when I asked who they were thinking about, Becca, who was one of these girls who swore she was gonna be a star when she grew up, said we should do the project on this lady named Sally Ride.

"First woman in space," she said, strangely pointing up at the ceiling. Okay. I can't front. Not a bad suggestion. But then Taylor said, for the second time, all these choices were too serious, as if the topic wasn't a serious topic. I mean, it's hard to be seen as important if you ain't never been through nothing serious. But Teylor, who goes by TeeTee (one of the few nicknames) decided to add her two cents (by the way, I'd want my face on the penny, because pennies be everywhere and they'd get my skin tone right) and muddy up our brainstorming session with the . . . uh . . . brilliant suggestion of Taylor Swift. Becca didn't say nothing. And I wanted to shoot it down, because we already had a Taylor and a Teylor in the group and I just couldn't take another one. But thankfully, Taylor hit TeeTee with a swift no.

So since serious was all I kept hearing on Friday, I decided to keep Monday light by trying out some of that "Momly-Ma special." Some good ol' small talk. And no, I don't know why I care, why these girls in my class matter to me, except for the fact that I'm just trying to make the best of the situation. I figured weekends had to be a common bond. I mean, it don't matter who you are, Saturday is Saturday.

"This weekend, well . . . ," TeeTee started. She used

the long, skinny part of a pen cap to scrape grime from under her nails. "Saturday, I hit the mall."

"Me too," Taylor followed.

"I know you did, because you were with me!" TeeTee squealed to Taylor, clenching her fingers into a bear paw to check her nails. Oh, I guess I should make clear that TeeTee and Taylor are best friends. Besties. Another word I don't like. It's just stupid. Bestie and best friend take the exact same amount of time to say. It ain't like an abbreviation. That's like me calling my teammates my teamies. Anyway, not only are Taylor and TeeTee best friends, but they're also cousins (cuzzies) and pretend to be sisters (sissies). They're like attached at the ponytail and call themselves T-N-T, which is funny because most of the time I just wished they'd explode.

Here's my issues, not with bestie-cousin-sisters, but with group projects: (1) One of the group members always has to volunteer their house for everyone to go over to and work on the presentation, which was never really a good thing because (2a) ain't nobody coming to my house and I don't wanna go to theirs, and (2b) only one person in the group actually does any work, which brings me to (3) that person is me. So as the T(a/e)ylors started going on about whether or not they

should both take a T-shirt—the same exact T-shirt—back to exchange it for a smaller size, and Becca was off in space, it was me who reached into my backpack and pulled out printouts of images of this Mexican painter lady, Frida Kahlo. I'd swiped them from the Internet over the weekend. Frida Kahlo was who we all settled on on Friday, by the way, with the help of Ms. Lanford, who figured political stuff, sick stuff, service stuff, and art stuff could all be explored in the life of this one artist. I was cool with it. I mean, she wasn't Harriet or Flo Jo, but this lady, Frida, wore suits, stood up to dudes, and had issues with her legs. Good enough for me.

After a few seconds of the other girls looking at the images, I got tired of waiting for them to ask how my weekend was. Not like they would've cared about me cooking Maddy's breakfast, making sure she ate her dinner, doing Maddy's hair, church with the Ma (and the stinky Thomases), then letting Maddy crawl in bed with me last night while I counted all the beads in her hair, one by one, hoping she'd be asleep before I got to ninety, plus on top of all that, finding time to research Frida Kahlo for this project and not go to the mall. Oh, and I had to run. But still, I was waiting for them to ask. Waiting for them to be normal. Or at least treat me normal.

"Well, I had a track meet," I threw out there, out of the blue, not like I really wanted to talk about that, either, but I was willing to just try to connect or whatever.

"Whoa. This lady is in desperate need of some tweezers," Taylor said, actually pinching the paper between Frida Kahlo's eyes.

"Came in first in the eight hundred meter," I lied, still waiting on someone, anyone to say something about it. To acknowledge me. But before anyone did, Ms. Lanford popped over to check on us.

"How are we doing, ladies?" Ms. Lanford was now standing beside our desks, which had been pushed together into a square, all of us facing each other, the pictures of Frida—bright-colored self-portraits including monkeys, birds, and flowers—spread out.

The girls all flashed toothpaste-commercial smiles and gave different versions of "Good." I bit my bottom lip and prayed for the bell.

After school I never waste time at my locker. I scurry down to the end of the main corridor, eyes darting from forward to floor, through the mess of hair flippers, the wrath-letes (kids who feel like it's a sport to make everyone's life miserable), the know-it-alls, the know-

nothings, the hush-hushes (super quiet, super shy), the YMBCs (You Might be Cuckoo)—the girls who wear all black and cover their backpacks with buttons and pins—and the girls whose boyfriends, brothers, and fathers all wear khaki pants. Every. Day. I know this sounds kinda mean, but it's real. So real. It's like a rich kid obstacle course, and once I make it all the way to the end, I walk through the courtyard to the north wing, where I then have to maneuver through the younger version of all those same categories. Except way cuter. And less annoying. And the cutest and least annoying of them all (in my opinion) is Maddy, who I always find waiting for me just outside her teacher Mrs. Stein's, who she calls Mrs. S's, door.

"Ready?" I ask, awkwardly wrapping my arms around her detachable hunchback she calls a backpack, only way I can get a hug in with that thing on.

"Yep." She turns around and throws the peace sign up to her friends, then turns back and squeezes me, tries to lift me. It's something she's been doing for a while. She has a weird obsession with being strong, with proving she can lift heavy things. She got it (and the peace sign thing too) from Uncle Tony, who used to do push-ups with Maddy sitting on his back, counting in a cartoon voice. Mickey Mouse. Goofy. *Goofy*.

Anyway, after Maddy's cheese and squeeze, we head out to meet Momly, who is always there on time to meet us in the car pickup line.

I'm sure I don't have to tell you what the ride home was like. Maddy . . . talking.

Mona got glue in her hair. Again.

I picked Willa up.

Lauren cried six times.

You know Willa, right? She bigger than me.

Mrs. S's birthday is on Thursday. I think she's turning like eighty.

She's so lucky she gets to spend it at the farm.

We'll try to get the cows to moo "Happy Birthday" to her.

Oh, don't forget you have to drive me to the farm on Thursday, Momly.

Mrs. S reminded us. So I'm reminding you.

Hopefully Lauren won't cry the whole time.

Anyway, Riley wouldn't pass the ball to me at first. But then she did. And then I passed it back. And then she passed it to Rachel. And then . . .

While Maddy . . . Maddied . . . I changed my clothes in the backseat. It was my daily shape-shifting routine, which wasn't a big deal because I always wore my shorts under my skirt, and a tank top under my button-up, so

that by the time we reached MLK Park—my homework started—and I told Maddy what I told her every day, that I'd help her with hers after practice, I was ready to jump out and run from my motormouthed little sister and hit the track. Which, I gotta admit for me, even with just a second-place ribbon, was sometimes more home than home.

4

TO DO: Get over it
(I mean, the whole second place thing)

“STRAIGHTEN UP, PATTY!” Momly called out from the car window before pulling off. She said this all the time. Drove me crazy. Always nagging me about my posture or whatever. *Roll your shoulders back, Patty. Stop hunching, Patty.* And even though it was annoying, I knew she was right. I always walked like I had on a backpack, even when I didn't. *You'll be walking with a cane by the time you're my age, Patty.* And even though Momly's age was a long, long, lonnnng way away, I wasn't trying to be walking with no cane by then. Or ever. So, I shook off the nag and rolled my shoulders back.

I made it all the way to the track with my back straight and caught up with Ghost and Lu going on about some dude who Ghost, I guessed, was having beef with at school.

"Soon as spring break is over, we'll see if he got something to say to me," Ghost said.

"Man, he ain't gon' say nothin'. He ain't even gon' look your way. Probably at home right now still crying about getting smoked on Saturday," Lu followed.

"Burnt him up. Might've ruined his little vacation," Ghost topped off, laughing and slapping Lu's hand. Those two were always braggin' about something. That was regular. So regular that I let my shoulders roll forward again, comfortable. Just couldn't help it. Plus, these fools, and just about everybody else on our team, were already on break, and I was still in school getting academied. Fancy School Patty. And I didn't know if Sunny was on break or not because he gets home-schooled, which, to me, just seemed like vacation with a little bit of education sprinkled in. Sunny didn't seem to be paying Ghost and Lu no mind, though. He was just sitting on the track with his feet pressed together, his long legs butterflied.

"Wassup, Patty?" Lu said.

"Wassup," I said with nothing on it. I sat next to

Sunny, stretched my legs out in front of me. I was trying to get my mind right. Trying to refocus, work harder. First practice of a new week—after the first meet. Time to get to work. Ghost just looked at me and nodded. Probably could see the serious on my face, so he knew not to say nothing. Too bad Aaron, our team captain, didn't get it.

"Yo, Patty, you still mad?" Aaron asked, stoking a fire he pretended he didn't know was there. I didn't think he was necessarily trying to be mean, but . . . he knew it was a soft spot, especially since the reason he was asking was because of the way I had acted when I crossed the finish line.

Now, Ghost was giving Aaron a *what's your problem* look. "Yo, chill!" he warned. But the truth is, I didn't need Ghost or Lu or Sunny or anybody to take up for me. But I didn't say nothing. Just let it ride.

"I'm just sayin', it was the first race of the season," Aaron bulldozed on. "Let it go. Ain't no reason to be mad about losing." Losing? Losing? Back went my shoulders, and out came the mad.

"Yeah, maybe for you," I shot back, glaring at Aaron. "But I'm still mad. And so what?"

"Uh-oh," Curron warned. He was a mid-distance runner like me, but had more mouth than he had

moves, so he already knew the power of my clapback.

"Shut up, Curron," Aaron spat. "Yo, Patty, I ain't even mean it like that. It's just you got second place and was acting all funky for the rest of the meet, like no one else had races to run, like you ain't got teammates that needed your support." Spoken like a true captain.

I didn't respond. Just stretched my arms out in front of me and grabbed my left foot, pulled myself down until my head was on my knee. Sunny was doing the same stretch. I turned my face so that my cheek was resting on my kneecap, and caught his eyes catching my legs.

"Hey, Patty," he said, in his usual sweet voice, which in this moment seemed a little creepy. Actually, a lot creepy. He looked down my leg awkwardly and flashed a timid smile.

"Hey . . . uh, Sunny," I replied, uncomfortable. Was Sunny checkin' me out? If he was, now was not the time. Also . . . no . . . gross . . . stop it . . . right now . . . seriously.

"What happened to your nails?" he asked. Oh, he was checkin' out my nails, and the fact that there was no polish on them. But there had been on Saturday at the meet. I did my best to make a cool design using

the Defenders' colors, but it ended up just looking like bright blue with orange squiggles. I scrubbed them clean before church yesterday—another thing Ma would've said made me look too fast. Ugh, yeah . . . I know. That's the point. But Ma was talking about a different kind of fast.

"I took the polish off," I said. "Why?"

"Oh, just because they were cool. Reminded me of Flo Jo," Sunny said with a shrug. I wanted to ask him how he even knew about Flo Jo's nails, but I didn't. Because there was no need. Because he obviously knew something. I did, however, let a smile inch onto my face for the first time since the race. The first time in two days.

"Okay, listen up," Coach said. He'd been standing off to the side talking to Whit, the assistant coach. But now he was in front of us, clapping his hands together to get our attention. "Before we start practice, I first want to say good job on Saturday. Some of you did better than others, but all of you put your hearts into it. I saw some things on the track that I loved"—then he looked straight at me—"and I saw some things that didn't quite rub me right. Either way, I'm proud." He pulled something from his back pocket. A metal stick. A baton. "But now, we got work to do." He told

everyone else to go start their warm-up laps, but he asked me to stay behind. And once everyone else had a two-hundred-meter head start, Coach "invited" me to jog with him. That's right, Coach was running. And he never ran. He just ordered us to run. Even though we all knew about his whole used-to-be-an-Olympian thing, it was so hard to believe because we never saw him even pretend to take a stride.

After about ten seconds of nothing but the sound of rubber on asphalt, Coach finally said, "You did good Saturday, kid," the silver of the baton gleaming in the sun.

Jog, jog, jog.

I let my arms drop down to my side, shook them out. "I did okay," I said, blah.

"Second place is a lot more than okay," Coach replied, clearly trying to make me feel better. "Still got you a piece of fabric, didn't it?"

The piece of fabric Coach was talking about was the ribbon. The second-place ribbon. The not-first-place second-place ribbon. The one they give you for false finishes. "Yeah, I guess."

Jog, jog, jog, jog.

"Here." He extended the baton to me. I took it, not sure why he was giving it to me, but it didn't matter

because as soon as I took it, he said, "Now give it back." I gave it back and about two seconds later, he extended it toward me again. "Take it." Confused and getting annoyed, I grabbed it again. "Give it to me," he said, motioning for it almost immediately, his palm up, rising and falling with each step. We were almost a whole lap around, and I could see my teammates well into their second and final one. I slapped the baton into Coach's hand again and this time asked, "What we doin' this for?"

"Take it," he said, passing it to me a third time.

Jog, jog, jog.

"Coach, why you doin' this?" I repeated. My attitude started to sizzle as I reluctantly took the baton again.

"I'll tell you. But first"—jog, jog, jog—"give it back to me."

I ticked my tongue against my teeth and gave Coach the bar, the metal clinking against his wedding ring. Finally he was ready to stop being a weirdo and tell me whatever it was he was trying to get me to understand.

"How did it feel in your hand?"

Jog, jog, jog, jog.

"I don't know," I said, trying to find an answer. "I guess . . . normal?"

"Right. It felt normal, every time it went from my hand to yours, and from yours to mine." Coach passed the baton from one hand to the next. "Now imagine it's got magic powers, and every time I give it to you I'm transferring some kind of power from me to you. Like strength, or something. And when you pass it back, you transfer your power to me. So we stay balanced. Now if for some reason you decide not to pass it to me, what do you think happens?"

"I don't get your strength," I said in the voice I give the hair flippers when they tell me I should try "a little powder on my nose." The *whatever* voice.

"Exactly." Jog, jog. Coach cleared his throat and tried to sound as if he wasn't winded, but I knew he was because his words were thinning out. "Now this baton represents the energy of our team. When we're passing it from one person to the next, the team's energy stays, like you said, normal. But if anyone decides they don't want to pass it, they don't want to participate in it, well then, that energy is knocked off balance and your teammates are left empty-handed. Weakened. You understand?"

So here's what I was figuring about Coach. He was probably one of those kids who wrote poetry and stuff like that. He acts all cool, but the way he be talking

makes me think he was more like Sunny when he was younger. Which is still cool. But a different kind of cool. And I don't really know if all his philosophies make sense, but we all understand what he be trying to tell us, no matter how left he gotta take us to get us right.

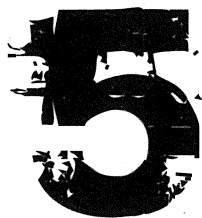
So, "I think so," is what I said back to him.

Coach cut his eyes at me—not satisfied.

"Well, to make sure you know so, let me make it clear. We are a team, Patty. You can pout and shout, but you *cannot* check out." Coach took a second before praising himself. "I should've been a rapper. Out here running on a track when I should've been rapping on a track!" He laughed. I did too, an inside belly chuckle. "So, you understand now?"

"Yeah."

"Good, because I don't feel like running no more." Coach made a hard left off the track and started walking across the grass. He flipped the baton in his hand over and over. "Hurry up and finish, Patina. . . ." Patina. Coach was always trying to be funny, and I knew he thought saying my name like that was comedy gold. He lifted the baton in the air like a wizard casting a spell and yelled, "We got work to do!"



TO DO: Dance, this time, like an old king is
watching (stiff and boring)

BY THE TIME I reached the other side of the track, Coach was already laying out what everyone needed to do in practice, which, for the most part, was basically what we always did on Mondays. Fartleks—fart licks—which is basically just when you run kinda fast for three minutes then real fast for one minute. Then kinda fast for three, real fast for one. Over and over and over again. Then there's some specialized training, where the sprinters would break off and do their own thing, the mid-distance runners would do the same, and the distance runners, well . . . they just run all

practice. But then, out of nowhere, Coach threw a wrench in the plan.

"We're also gonna spend some time working on relay," he said, slapping the baton against his thigh. "Not all twenty of you."

"There's nineteen of us, Coach. Chris is gone, remember?" Aaron slipped in. Coach just raised his eyebrows, glared at Aaron in the *I'm talkin'* way. Plus, rounding up ain't against the rules. Seriously.

"Anyway, just my mid-distance runners for now," Coach elaborated. "At some point we'll develop the 4x400, but we don't have enough veteran sprinters on the boys' side for that. He nodded at Ghost and Lu. "We'll get you newbies where you need to be soon. We got a long season ahead of us. But for now, let's start with one of our sweet spots—the 4x800. Let me get Freddy, Mikey, Eric, and Curron. And for the girls, I need Deja, Krystal, Brit-Brat, and joining them as the fourth will be Patty." He glared at me. "Can you handle that?" I nodded. "Good. Coach Whit is gonna work with y'all. These two groups are our 4x800 relay teams. If anyone has a problem with this decision, speak now or forever hold your peace."

I looked around the circle at all the faces, each one either nodding or smirking. I was cool with running

relay, even though I never had before. I've watched it enough times—at meets, the Olympic races they show on TV, and Internet clips—to know that all you had to do was take the baton, then run as fast as you could to hand it off to the next person. Like passing the collection plate at church.

"All right, ladies, come this way," Coach Whit called, leading me and the other three girls to the outside of the track. She was holding a small radio, one of the old ones with a CD player and a handle. The kind Cotton's grandma got in her kitchen. Whit set it on the track. Then she gave us what I can only describe as an evil grin. "Today, I'm gonna teach y'all how to dance."

Wait. What?

"Dance?" Brit-Brat bawked. "I don't know about them"—she thumbed at us—"but I already know how to do that." She put her hands together in a single clap, then put them up to her chest, palms out, and started shoving the air—a standing push-up—like they did on the old-school rap videos my father made me watch. Salt-N-Pepa style.

"Heyyyyy!" Deja howled, joining in, dipping low.

"Go, Deja! Go, Brit-Brat! Go, Deja! Go, Brit-Brat! It's your birthday, but not really. We at track practice.

We at track practice. Track, track, track, track!" Krystal chanted.

I didn't join them, but their silly dancing definitely helped with the process of pulling me out of my second-place slump. Brit-Brat's craziness reminded me so much of Cotton's, jumping around, clapping, telling me to make sure I'm getting good angles with the phone. This was something Taylor and TeeTee and Becca, and all the hair flippers I went to school with, couldn't do. What I was missing. Even so, though me and the girls on the track team could kinda relate, I was still the new girl, and I hadn't really gotten close to everybody yet. At least, not the vets. My crew were the newbies, and the only one of them I could see breaking out in a full-on dance break was Sunny—which would be the funniest dance break of all time, with his lanky self. So I didn't feel like I could really join in. But Brit-Brat's goofiness definitely made me feel like maybe I could vibe with them. Maybe next time. Like maybe the vets were cool.

"Okay, okay." Coach Whit tried to settle us down and hold in her laugh at the same time. "You do know there are other dances that don't involve all that booty action, right?"

"Whatever, Whit. You probably be just like this in

the club," Brit-Brat said, tapping Deja with the back of her hand.

"You be goin' to the club, Whit?" Deja asked, smiling all silly.

"None of your business. And this is not the club," Whit shut them down, shaking her head. "Anyway, we're gonna learn a different kind of dancing." She pushed play on the radio. And the music that came out wasn't . . . it wasn't classical, but . . .

"Oh, so the track ain't good enough to be a club, but it is good enough to be a ballroom, huh?" Krystal jabbed.

Ballroom. That's the kind of music it was. All royal sounding, like we were about to witness a prince and princess have their first dance or something.

"That's right," Whit said, stepping back and lifting one arm up and the other arm out as if she was being held by someone. "Now, this is called the waltz." We all stood there looking at her like she had lost her mind as she lifted onto her tippy-toes and started counting, "One-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three," moving robotically, back, then left, then front, then right, dancing in squares, the violins from the music whining in the background.

"What y'all waiting for?" Whit called out, stepping and sliding, her back stiff as a board.

"We waiting for you to stop," Krystal said.

"And I'm waiting on y'all to start," Whit threw right back, one-two-three-ing forward. I glanced over at the track. The other runners were doing their own thing, for the most part. The distance runners were working on pacing, the other eight-hundred runners were running fart licks, working on endurance, and the sprinters, well, specifically, Lu and Ghost, they were looking over at us, smirking. Ugh.

"You serious?" Brit-Brat was asking, already knowing the answer. As a matter of fact, she didn't even wait for Whit to answer and instead saved herself the frustration by being the trailblazer for the rest of us and getting in position. One arm up as if she was waiting for someone to grab it and arm wrestle her, and the other arm curved as if wrapped around the waist of somebody else. Someone with a rose in their mouth.

Krystal didn't follow.

Neither did Deja.

But me, I was new, and it didn't seem like a good idea to pop slick on one of the coaches. So I did what I had to do and became a real-life dance mannequin. As soon as I lifted my arm, I could feel Lu's and Ghost's snickers run down my spine, prickly like ice water. I didn't know if they really were laughing, but

I was pretty sure they were. And even if they weren't, I could feel them thinking about it.

"One-two-three, one-two-three." Coach Whit was still counting and pacing, ignoring the fact that Deja and Krystal were holding out.

"Just do it," Brit-Brat groaned at them. "So we can get it over with."

"I just don't see what this has to do with running," Deja said, reluctantly lifting her arms.

"I wanna tell you, but since y'all making me dance alone, I can't," Whit said, batting her eyes, laughter just under her tongue.

"Ugh." Krystal threw herself into a lazy karate stance.

"Very nice. Now ladies, follow me." And then, back to the one-two-three, one-two-three, except now we were following Whit's steps. Backward. Left. Forward. Right. One-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three. *Four-five-six, seven-eight-nine, blah-blah-blah, blah-blah-blah*, I muttered to myself, betting that this was what the real fart lickers, Lu and Ghost, were saying to each other, their tongues hanging from their mouths like hounds, mimicking us (me) by doing the robot or something. And Aaron was probably saying something like, "You can't win first place

being ballerinas," even though this wasn't even ballet. But he was probably right (if he was saying that). I, a second-place winner (loser), couldn't win first doing this. I didn't know what kind of training methods Whit had, or what discount aisle Coach found her in, but . . . dancing? Dancing?

"One-two-three, one-two-three. Very nice, girls," Whit said, all coachy like this was real practice. Then she sideswiped us. "Now, pair up."

"What?" Krystal stopped. Arms down. Head cocked.

"You always run when the gun goes off, so I know you ain't deaf, Krystal." Whit was clearly reaching the end of her patience rope. And I couldn't blame her. But I also couldn't blame Krystal for being snappy. This was wack. "Pair up. You're gonna dance with each other, and you can pout and suck your teeth and whatever else, but if you wanna win as a relay team . . ." Whit stopped dancing, folded her arms across her chest. "It's your call."

Well, no surprise here. I wanted to win. I really wanted to win, and straight up, if Whit told me that having my blood cleaned was the way to win, I would go to dialysis just like Ma. Now, I know that ain't the case. But I'd do it if it was.

I glanced over at Brit-Brat. Nodded. She turned

toward me and reached for my hand. "Let's just get it over with," she mumbled, facing me but directing her words to her fellow vets.

Krystal and Deja let out loud breathy huffs and positioned themselves in front of each other.

"Now, just like before, but this time guide each other. Trust each other." Whit took a pause, inhaled and lifted her arms as if she was conducting an orchestra, and started again with the count.

One-two-three.

Me and Brit-Brat took a step back. Back for Brit, forward for me. It was awkward.

"Same leg, same motion, same time," Whit instructed.

One-two-three.

Me and Brit-Brat moved left. It was a little smoother.

One-two-three.

Forward, which was actually backward for me. Not smooth at all. As a matter of fact, Brit-Brat stepped on my foot. Good thing she's light. Keep moving.

One-two-three. To the right. Decent.

And on and on, but every time we'd make the step forward (which was my step backward) Brit would crush me. Just squash my feet with hers, until finally I just couldn't take it no more.

"You think you could watch your feet, Brit?" I said, trying to be as nice as possible. I didn't want her to think I was coming at her or anything. I didn't need no drama. But I did need my toes. I mean, who can run with broken feet? When I said it, I braced myself for the quick, sharp tongue-lashing that I usually served up whenever somebody tried me.

"My bad," Brit-Brat said softly, which I have to admit, threw me for a loop. I guess I shouldn't have expected her to trip, especially since she was the first person to even give this whole dance thing a chance. "My feet are huge."

I looked down. Whoa. When most people say that, well, first of all, I'm only used to them being boys. Boys around Barnaby Terrace like David Hunter, who at ten years old wore a size ten shoe. My mother said he had feet like rowboats. And if that was the case, then Brit-Brat had yachts. *How you even run with those things?* I wanted to say.

"It's cool," is what I actually said.

One-two-three.

But it wasn't cool, because it kept happening. She would try to move them to the side, but they just . . . were everywhere. EVERYWHERE.

One-two-three.

One-two-three. *Ouch!*

I had to adjust. Started taking bigger steps back in hopes of steering clear of those floppers. And it worked, but then she adjusted to my adjustment and still caught my big toe. Argh!

"Very good, ladies. Now, I want you to take one step back. Hold your pose, but separate yourself from your partner," Coach Whit instructed, the song now fading out, a new one beginning. The sound of claps came from the other end of the track. I cringed, already knowing what was happening, but I had to look anyway. And there they were, Ghost and Lu, slapping their stupid hands together like clowns.

"Dancing with the stars, Patty!" Lu yelled out. And before I could say anything—and I was going to—Coach, like, *Coach* Coach, started laughing too. He had been working with the boys' relay on the field and was now walking toward Lu and Ghost, letting out the nastiest cackle ever. So loud and ridiculous that everyone stopped what they were doing to watch him. He laughed and laughed, slapping his knee and patting his chest and throwing his head back, all the way across the field until he reached Lu and Ghost up by the hundred-meter start line. He threw his arm around both of their shoulders. They were still chuckling.

Then Coach whispered something in Lu's ear. Then in Ghost's. And then they weren't smiling no more. Coach pulled away from them and took a few steps back. Ghost and Lu looked horrified. But then they faced each other, awkwardly, took each other by the hands, awkwardly, held each other (barely) around the waist, awkwardly, and did their version of the waltz. Whoa. I almost passed out, and I wasn't the only one. Everyone started losing it.

"C'mon, fellas, stay on beat. One-two-three, one-two-three," I yelled, snapping my fingers on count. Brit-Brat jumped right in, and so did Krystal and Deja. Even Whit joined us.

"One-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three," we all chanted, eventually leading to everyone chanting, all the runners, even Sunny.

Then we were all singing, "ONE-TWO-THREE!" waving our arms around like conductors (I don't know why, it just seemed appropriate), watching Lu and Ghost waddle side to side like toddlers who had just pooped their pants.

"Okay, okay, ladies," Coach Whit cut us off, still laughing, and tried to wrangle us back in. "Let's refocus." We all regained our composure and tried to reposition ourselves for more waltzing. Just as we grabbed hands,

Coach Whit said, "We're gonna do the same thing, but this time, let go of each other's hands. Separate yourselves so that another person could fit between you."

"Wait," Krystal said, immediately winding up. Her arms went from around Deja to her own hips. "So now we gotta dance in threes? Well, if that's the case, I volunteer Deja to dance between them two." Krystal pointed at me and Brit-Brat.

"Krystal . . . no. Just . . ." Coach Whit was stuck, struck by Krystal's ridiculousness. "Could one of y'all explain, please?" Deja took on the task. Then we took our places again, but this time Brit and I were standing about a foot away from each other. We held our hands the same, and on Whit's count, danced the waltz once more.

"Back," Whit instructed. "Nice and smooth. Remember when you were closer, the pressure of your partner, knowing the steps, working and moving in unison."

"You like a hippie or something?" Deja asked.

"Focus," Whit said. "Might learn something."

"Doubt it," Krystal groused under her breath, but still loud enough for us to hear.

One-two-three.

"Left. Now, forward." I was happy—relieved—there was space between Brit and me. Space for her feet to

meet ground, and not my toes. It was also kinda cool to see all four of us moving around, swaying and stepping all at the same time. Reminded me of the Olympics—the only thing I like to watch, besides running, are the synchronized swimmers. I mean, to move like that in the water is crazy. Cheerleaders do it too, sort of. But not like synchronized swimmers. And me, Brit-Brat, Deja, and Krystal (once she finally shut up) were like synchronized swimmers . . . uh . . . synchronized runners. Ah. Ahhhhhhhh. Sneaky, sneaky, Whit.

We had made like twenty or thirty squares before Whit, finally, thank you Lord, cut the music. “Okay, that’s enough. Good job. So, how did it feel?” Then she pointed at Krystal, who was already fixing her mouth to crack a joke. Whit didn’t say nothing to her. Just pointed, like, *Don’t*.

“It felt weird at first,” I spoke up.

“Yeah, definitely. And I kept stepping on Patty’s feet,” Brit admitted. “But then we kinda adjusted, y’know?”

“Right. Same for us. Like after a few times you just kinda stop thinking about it,” Deja said.

Coach Whit looked at Krystal, who was smirking. “It was cool,” she said with a shrug, eyes everywhere.

Coach Whit nodded, poked her bottom lip out,

not in the sad way, but in the surprised and satisfied way. "Well, let me ask you all this," a clever grin replacing the pokey-lip. "How many of you realized that I stopped counting a long time ago?"

The rest of practice was Whit giving us the rundown about the handoff—the passing of the baton—and how it was just like dancing the waltz, but we didn't actually practice it. She said we would be spending a portion of every practice for the rest of the week doing relay work; she was hoping that we'd be ready to give it a try by Saturday's meet.

I found out after practice that Krystal, Deja, and Brit-Brat had run relay last year, which is why they were so annoyed by the whole dance thing.

"I'm just sayin', it ain't that deep. You run, then you hand the stick to the next person. Then they run." That's pretty much exactly what I thought it was. "All this cha-cha mess was . . . I mean, it was fine, but it ain't necessary," Krystal complained afterward. She took a swig of water, then threw her bottle in her duffel bag, zipped it shut.

"The waltz," I corrected her, even though she was echoing my own feelings. It was cool, but it didn't really seem all that helpful. At least not yet. Krystal shot me

a look, but I didn't pay it no mind because over her shoulder I could see Maddy coming toward me. Krystal went on mimicking the one-two-three count, Deja chiming in with the perfect amount of complementary snark, Brit-Brat laughing at them both.

"A'ight, I'll see y'all tomorrow."

"A'ight, Patty."

"Bye, Patty."

"Yo, Patty!" Ghost was just coming off the track, wiping his face with the bottom of his shirt. "You out?"

"Yeah."

"Without saying nothin'?" He cocked his head to the side. "So you ain't one of us no more? You too good for Sunny, Lu, and me?" He smiled, making it clear he was joking.

"Sunny's my guy. I love Sunny."

"Oh you love Sunny, but not me and Lu?"

"I mean . . ." At that moment, Maddy's arms wrapped around my waist. I could feel her rocking back, trying to get me to lift off my feet. I kissed her on the top of the head, immediately noticing fewer beads on her braids, which was normal. They fall off during the week like acorns from a tree. "Hey, hey." I tried to get her to stop squeezing. "Tell Momly I'm coming. First, say hi to Ghost." Maddy waved, then

turned and ran back toward the car. Now, back to Ghost. "I mean . . . I wouldn't wanna get in the middle of y'all relationship."

"Stop."

"Dancing so sweetly with each other."

"Stop."

"So precious."

"I'm leaving." Ghost turned around and walked toward Lu, who was sitting on a bench, unlacing his track shoes.

"C'mon, Ghost. Ghost! Don't be that way!" I begged to his back.

"Bye, Patty." He threw his hand up, dismissing me.

"I love you, Ghost!" I shouted. "But just not as much as I love Sunny!" Of course, Sunny heard me, which I wasn't thinking about when I said it. We caught eyes, but I didn't wanna make it weird, or for him to think it was anything more than a joke, so I added, "Because you pay attention to details." Then held my hands up, spirit-finger style. "Thanks for noticing my Flo Jos. See you tomorrow."



TO DO: Eat turkey wings
(for the millionth day in a row)

THE RIDE HOME always goes like this:

Momly turns the radio news down, then asks how practice was. I tell her it was fine. She asks if I'm tired and even if I am, I tell her I'm not, just because I don't want Maddy to hear that I'm tired and think I won't be able to help her with stuff like her homework, which every day when I ask her about it, she tells me Momly already helped her, and before I can even say anything, Momly just says, "Didn't want you to have to worry about it," which I just nod at. Then I tell Momly I'll help her make dinner as soon as my homework's done,

and she says, "I've already started cooking," and by then, Maddy's already started kicking the back of my seat for the rest of the ride, which drives me crazy, but also in some weird way, kinda relaxes me. Like a massage and a message—*I'm here, Patty. And I'm fine.*

And today was no different. I was tired. Acted like I wasn't. Maddy's homework was done, and I had a little left of mine to do before dinner. Nothing too major. I knocked out my math assignment. English homework was to think about cannons, which basically meant English homework was to think about history homework, which was going to be reading up more on Frida Kahlo so I could be ready to add some new information to our project. Not like anyone else was going to. I figured T-N-T and Becca were probably at home, I don't know, tanning or something. It wouldn't have surprised me if they had one of those skin cooker things in their houses. Those beds you lay on that come down over the top of you and roast you, and you come out looking like rotisserie chicken. Meanwhile, I was researching.

THINGS I LEARNED ABOUT FRIDA, so far:

- (1) She was from Mexico.
- (2) She was diagnosed with polio when

she was six, which made her right leg skinnier than her left.

- (3) When she was eighteen, she got into a bus accident that broke her spine, crushed her right leg and foot, and made it impossible for her to have babies. Doctors said she would never walk again.

"Patty? Um . . . Patty?" A squeaky voice, way too silly to be real, came from the other side of my bedroom door. Uncle Tony. He dropped the Daffy Duck talk. "Dinner's almost ready. You almost done with your homework?" My uncle's voice, when he's speaking like a regular human being, is deep, but not in a scary way. He has one of those voices that you wish you could touch, wrap yourself up in like a blanket. A voice like a dad. And, I guess . . . like an uncle. A favorite uncle.

Me and Uncle Tony been close for forever. He's one of these big-kid grown-ups, a goof troop, all jokes, all the time. And when I was younger, he was one of the only people who could make my mom laugh—like, a laugh that seem to come up from her feet—after we lost my father. And up from her belly,

after she lost her feet. As a matter fact, he was one of the only people who could make any of us laugh back then.

"I'm almost done," I said, bookmarking the websites I'd been browsing. "Tell Momly I'll be right out to help." I jotted one last note. Something I'd read that I didn't think was that important to the project, but . . . maybe.

(4) Frida was close to her father.

And that, more than anything, was what me and Frida had in common. Only difference is, Frida's dad didn't die when she was young. So she didn't know what that was like. She didn't know what it felt like to be broken until she was older. And not only did I know the feeling of something breaking inside me, I also had to watch my mom go through it and basically get paralyzed in a whole different way. In her brain and in her heart. Matter of fact, after Dad passed, that's when Ma got all churchy-churchy. The beginning of catching the spirit and dancing in the aisle and "praying for peace in the eye of the storm."

But she had no idea the storm was just getting started, because that's also when she started eating.

Like, a lot. And not just regular food, but sweets. All my dad's favorite recipes. Sweet potato cheesecake and peanut butter brownies and white chocolate cookies and, of course, the delicious yellow cupcake with strawberry icing.

"Your daddy used to say this thing was so good they'd make you slap your mama," Ma would say, nibbling the top of the cupcake. "So you better not have too many of 'em."

We'd do like a ha-ha-ha, and then she'd have too too many of them. I guess maybe the sweets were a way of staying kinda connected to my dad. Dessert for the deserted. And I'm not gonna pretend like it wasn't amazing living in a house that always smelled like cooked sugar—which smelled like him. And heaven. It was great. But eventually, it wasn't. Because diabetes came and took Ma's legs. Took most of what was left of her laugh, too.

And that's when the actual storm reached maximum storminess. And I was pretty messed up by the whole thing, but doing my best to be strong and brave and big, and all the other things I ain't really feel like being at the time. I'd rather be sneaking lipstick on in the bathroom, sending Cotton selfies of how fly I looked, then washing it all off so my mother wouldn't

see it. Or sitting on the curb at Cotton's, painting our nails with the nail polish I wasn't allowed to wear that her big brother, Skunk, would steal from the beauty store, even though I would have to scrub mine clean before I came back home unless it was clear polish, but then, what's the point? Or trying to convince my mother to let me use cucumber-mango or berry-rose water or kiwi-coconut or any other fruity-flowery good-smelling lotion on her swollen, cracked-up legs. Flipping through magazines, cringing at kitten heels, even though those were the only ones I ever had a shot of wearing in Bev Jones's house.

That's what I used to do, what I wanted to be doing, but I couldn't do none of those things no more. At least, not like I wanted to, because now I had to look out for Maddy, who was just . . . confused. I think she had just turned four, too young to really understand what was going on with Ma's health. And it was really hard to explain it all to her. So I told Maddy that Ma's legs had to . . . go away. Looking back on it, maybe it wasn't the best idea, but at the time it was all I had. And it seemed to help. And that's when that crazy thing I was talking about earlier, that crazy moment with Maddy, happened.

She asked me to help her write a letter. She said it

was for school, so of course, I grabbed a pencil and a sheet of paper from her backpack, set Maddy in the little chair at her desk, leaned over, and asked what she wanted the letter to say.

She wanted it to say this:

Dear Mommy legs,

I remember my hand instantly started shaking, and I was squeezing the pencil tight enough to snap it in half. But I kept writing what Maddy told me to write.

Where did you go, and why did you have to leave? And what are you doing? Are you having fun without us? Are you jumping? Are you dancing? Are you running fast? Please come back. We miss you.

Love,

Madison Jones

I dropped the pencil.

"Maddy, what . . . what you gon' do with this?" I tried to clear the shake from my voice, and it took me flexing every muscle in my body—even cracked

my toes—just to keep the tears inside my face. Thank goodness her back was to me.

"First, I'm gonna bring it to school for show-and-tell."

"Oh . . . okay, um, and then what?"

"Well, after I show it to the class, I was gonna see if maybe you could send it."

"Send it?"

"To the legs." Maddy threw her head back, her big eyes staring up at me.

Hold it in, Patty. Hold it in. "Um . . . yeah, yes . . . I will . . . um, send it." I kissed her forehead.

"Your legs ain't gonna run away too, are they?" she asked, worry suddenly washing across her face.

"No, Maddy." I slapped my legs. "These ain't going nowhere."

"How you know?" she asked.

I didn't have a good answer to that, and instead toothed my bottom lip to keep it from quivering. "I just . . . I just do," I eked out, barely. "I'll prove it."

"How?" she asked. "How you gonna prove it?"

"Well . . . I don't know, but I'll figure it out." *Don't say it, Patty. Don't say it.* "I promise." I said it. And instantly felt like I messed up. Like I said something wrong. I wished I had had an invisible cupcake to stuff

in my mouth. Something. Some stupid pretend tea. Anything. I mean, how was I going to prove my legs weren't going to run away from me? Would this be one of those things I was going to have to hope Maddy just forgot about? But the pressure of it all was worth it, because the worry on Maddy's face unwound.

She nodded, then hit me with the gut punchiest of all gut punches. "Pinky promise?" Oh . . . no. Pinky promises, for us, ain't no joke. They're like contracts. Break a pinky promise and people will make you feel like you in jail or something. Friendship jail, or in this case, big sister jail.

Maddy held her pinky out. I hooked mine onto hers, touched thumbs. Now she knew there was no way I would let her down. Then she got back to business. She tapped the letter. "So, you know where to send this?" she followed—blow after blow after blow. Killing me, Waffle. But this one, I couldn't answer. At all. I just couldn't. So I just left, ran to my room, threw myself on the bed, and curled into a ball. *Breathe, Patty. Breathe.*

Crazy thing was, the next day at school we were having a field day, and I was paired on a relay race team with Lu. I know I said I never ran one, but this wasn't like a real relay. This was more just slapping each other's

hands and running as fast as we could. And after our race, it was Lu who told me about his track club he was in at the time—the Sparks. That night, I went home and asked Uncle Tony and Momly, and all the dots connected. My first club team. The rest, as they say, is history. Or . . . present. All I know is it just seemed like something somewhere (um . . . legs don't got souls, right?) was telling me to do it. Pushing me to do it. Not just for me. But for Dad. And for Ma. And for Maddy, who (bonus!) I suddenly—thankfully—had an answer for. Pinky promise and all.

Turkey wings. Momly made turkey wings every single night. Every. Single. Night. So it's always funny because when Uncle Tony says things like, "Dinner's almost ready," I never have to ask what we having. I know what we having. Turkey wings. With rice and a veggie. Usually broccoli. Not even turkey breast, or a turkey leg, or even a turkey sandwich. Wings only. I had never had them before we came to live with them, and the first night Momly cooked them I told her I liked them, and that was it. It was set in stone. Turkey wings for life.

Momly kept the kitchen just like she kept the car. Clean. Germ free. Scrubbed from top to bottom with

something sudsy and bright colored, like sun yellow that smelled like rotten lemon, or mutant green that smelled like if every flower in the world sneezed. I pulled up to the table; Maddy was peeling fat off the meat. Cauliflower tonight. White broccoli. But not nearly as white as the spotless dinner plates.

After I told Momly what I had to tell her every night, which was that I was sorry for not finishing my homework in time to help her, she kicked off the dinner small talk with telling us about her favorite patient. See, she got her own business (but it don't make her boat money) where she takes care of sick people—Emily's Expert Care, which I think is a terrible name, by the way. Ain't got no warmth to it. No hug in it. I think it should be called something like, In Emily's Arms, or Mobile Mom. Something like that. Maddy thinks it should be called Momly to the Rescue, and, well, even though I don't like that name either, it would at least be a true statement. At least for Ma, because when me and Maddy went to go live with Momly and Uncle Tony, it just made sense for Momly to add Ma to her client list, along with the most-talked-about of them all, Mr. Warren, who Momly calls the sweetest old man alive. But I don't really know if my mother is the sweetest old

lady alive, and Ma wasn't really happy about none of it at first, just because she don't really like nobody taking care of her. But at least it's family and not some stranger, even though she can definitely, uh . . . be a lot to deal with. Actually, now that I think about it, maybe a stranger would've been better. I bet during those first few visits, Ma almost drove Momly to Jesus too. Or off a cliff.

"Well, my favorite patient besides your mother," Momly clarified about Mr. Warren. He was an old man who had Alzheimer's, which basically just means he can't really remember too much no more. She said sometimes random stuff popped into his head, but usually he doesn't know where he is, even though he's in his own house. So he just stays in the bed now. And Momly goes over there and feeds him, and makes sure he's all cleaned up while his daughter runs around taking care of errands and stuff. Momly's been looking out for him for a long time.

"I went to use the bathroom, and when I got back to the room, he was up out of the bed, tearing the room apart looking for something. He was yanking clothes out of the closet, and snatching pictures off the wall. So I asked him what he was looking for and he said, 'Something to buff the floor with.'"

"Buff the floor?" Uncle Tony asked. I was just as confused.

"That's what he said. And when I told him the floor didn't need buffing, he explained that he had mouths to feed, and who was going to take care of his family?" Momly laid her napkin in her lap, all proper, like she was eating in front of folks she ain't know. "Eventually I got him to calm down. Got him back in the bed, where he seemed to just melt back into himself. And I put everything back in the closet, and hung the pictures back on the wall." She shook her head. "Just one of those days. Poor guy." Momly took a breath, then turned to me. "Speaking of pictures on the wall, Patty, how's the whole Frida thing going?" Momly now pushed her fork through one of the tiny trees. Tired seemed to sit in her cheeks, make her face look saggy. It wouldn't have surprised me if she fell asleep right there at the table. "It's Frida, right?"

I nodded. I'd asked her if she knew anything about Frida when we first got the assignment, but she said she didn't. She had seen her in pictures, but that was pretty much it.

"It's goin' okay," I told her. "She seemed like a cool lady."

"But not as cool as you," Uncle Tony said, wiggling

his eyebrows. I wasn't sure if Momly was done small-talking me about my school project, but if she wasn't, Uncle Tony definitely ended any chance of it continuing because he awkwardly made a hard left into a totally different conversation. "Um . . . how was practice?"

Frida to track practice? Worst transition of all time. This is why Momly's the small-talk queen, and Uncle Tony's the cartoon character.

But I knew Uncle Tony wasn't trying to be rude, and that his jumpiness was all about my second-place loss at the meet on Saturday, which, by the way, he wasn't at. Had an emergency at the office. He does something called Information Technology, which is IT for short, or "it" for even shorter (which is what he says), which all just means he works with computers. And apparently sometimes computers have emergencies. Anyway, all this weird dinnertime chat was his way of knocking on the door of my brain, like, *Hey, is it okay to come in?* And if it wasn't for practice today, maybe I'd still be mad. I told him and Momly and Maddy about being chosen for the 4x800 relay team, and doing the waltz.

"The waltz? Like . . . the ball-gown, pinky-in-the-air dance?" Pinky-in-the-air was Uncle Tony's way of saying fancy.

"Yep. It was to teach us something about being in tune with each other. Like knowing each other so well that we don't even have to think about the handoff."

"Maddy, sweetheart, eat your cauliflower," Momly's exhausted voice slid between me and Uncle Tony's.

Maddy groaned. "Eat your cauliflower," I repeated. "It'll make you strong." Uncle Tony, following my lead, curled his arms up, making his muscles jump. Maddy smiled.

"Well, if doing the waltz is all it takes, then let me show you how to run even faster," Uncle Tony said. Then, as soon as he said it he braced himself, thinking I would catch feelings, as if I thought he was saying I don't run fast enough, and judging by Saturday, I don't. Not fast enough. But it was cool.

"Uncle Tony, I'm not mad no more," I told him, getting straight to the point so he could stop acting so weird.

His shoulders dropped, rolled back as if he just unbuttoned the top button on his pants after a big meal. "Oh, thank God," he exhaled the words, and I smirked, then tapped my fork on Maddy's plate. She stabbed a piece of cauliflower, lifted it to her mouth. Uncle Tony continued, "So, yeah, if you wanna run faster, try this."

He scooted out from the table, Momly already frowning at whatever was coming. And then . . . it came. The strangest thing I've seen Uncle Tony do, maybe ever. The Running Man. Spastic and offbeat and all over the place.

Maddy busted out laughing, white mush in her mouth, and I was right behind her, my laughter scrubbing away the last 10 percent of sad in me. Uncle Tony lurched forward, pumping his legs, panting, "This . . . is . . . how . . . you . . . do . . . it . . . Patty . . .," and I kept snickering. My uncle, a straight-up clown.