

ANXIETY OUTSIDE THE LANES:

Nadia had formed a system of grading her vomit before a track meet.

Despite what she ate, she believed that her sick always followed strict color coding that correlated to her performance in the race. Her mother had called it an unhealthy superstition. Her doctor called it persistent and dangerous emesis. Nadia called it digestive divination.

Green vomit meant that she would perform passably well, not enough to make an impact but just enough to feel accomplished. Yellow vomit meant that she would fail miserably, embarrass herself on the lanes and carry that humiliation to her next meet. Clear vomit meant that she would succeed magnificently, finish her race in first place or runner up, then endure the jealousy of other runners while enjoying the admiration of her classmates.

Behind her, the bleachers quaked with the roar of the crowd, which set her stomach rumbling again. She leaned back against the bleachers rear leg and immediately regretted it as vibrations coursed through her back. Her eyes widened. Her stomach clenched. And out came yesterday's dinner.

The sick that splattered on the pavement before her was clear, speckled with flecked of yellow. *A good omen?* Nadia stepped back, coughing. She withdrew a napkin from her hoodie pocket and pressed it to her mouth, wiping at her lips and hacking out any sick sticking to her tongue and molars.

Another cheer shook the air. Onlookers from the bleachers screamed out the name "STINGER!"

Undoubtedly referring to Kyle Stinger, one of the best 200-meter runners in the state. An athlete that had dominated the Everest Classic and every meet he had been in since then. And it was not just him. This meet was packed with magnificent athletes. Nneka Balogun. Melissa Prest. Aiko Nakamura.

And then her.

Nadia stood, crumpling the napkin in her hand. She crossed over to a nearby trash can, dropped the crushed paper inside. It fell among a heap of McDonald French fry cartoons sprinkled with salt, pull-up diapers reeking of shit, half-eaten pizza slices and Big Mac burgers, ripped up flyers and tattered cleats and threadbare socks.

Another shout shook the air. "Get them, Sapphire!" a maternal voice shouted. "We know you can win!"

Flies and bees buzzed about Nadia as she stared into the trash can.

God, I'm pathetic.

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There were few bigger meets than the Forestone Invitational.

Schools from every part of the state sent their best athletes to compete. There were short distance runners from Pearson High and hurdlers from Saint's Academy and pole vaulters from Atlantic High. Athletes of the highest level, winners and runner ups from all manners of meets, invitationals and classics. A meeting ground for future Olympians.

Autobuses and omnibuses trundled into packed parking lots, traffic police officers in high visibility jackets guiding sedans and minivans to open spots. Buses hissed to a stop, automatic doors clanked open, and the athletes marched out, all in uniform. Saint Academy students in

lion-gold and shadow-black gear. Atlantic High students wearing leaf-green and flame-red. Retner High students in dove-white and their sea-blue clothing.

All the athletes among the mill of students were impressive: boys from the 400-meter men all with times under forty-seven seconds, athletes from the 300-meter women's hurdle that all surpassed 43 seconds, women from the 100-meter, all with times under twelve seconds. Herculean accomplishments. But now, Nadia's attention passed over athletes from other events, searching for the speedsters from the 800-meter.

From Saint's Academy, canvas bag over her shoulder and broad smile on her face, was Nneka Balogun, the winner of the John Smith Invitational and the Small Stream Invitational. Winner of the Runner-up in the Youth Champion Meet.

Then from Atlantic High, cycling her arms, there was Sarah Fields cracking her neck, well-defined muscles outlined on her T-shirt. She was the Freshman Runner of the Year with an athletic scholarship to Harvard and the Winner of the King City Invitational.

And over with the Retner High girls, throwing a few punches in the air, is Eun-ji Kwon. A possible candidate for the Youth Summer Olympics and the runner-up of the Heartstone Classic. She is already exercising, running in place, darting forward before running in place again.

Nadia dabbled her fingers together and tried to breath easy.

Vomit bubbled at the back of her throat. *You'll be fine*. She stepped back into the crowd, forcing a smile and ending up with a scowl. She would be fine. All she had to do was ignore the screaming crowd and the wild onlookers and the skilled competitors and the fact that she had not done Monday homework for that scary Calculus teacher with the soul of a demon and that her mother would not be here to support her and that she did not train as much of she should have yesterday and that she really should have dropped track and field in 6th grade and joined the chess club...

Her stomach heaved.

And with track-star speed, she ran back behind the bleachers.

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The 200-meter and 400-meter events had gone by quickly.

The Saint Academy ace Shuzhen Tan had fulfilled expectations of her and dominated the 200 meters with an ungodly time of 23.28. Nadia could see her now, surrounded by peers from her high school, enamored onlookers, and what look like a reporter from the local newspaper with digital camera in hand, already excited to write a feature story on the sports star.

The 400-meter had been more contested, the victory seemed as if it could have gone to either Aaliyah Rivers from Atlantic or her classmate Emily Rhodes. The two ran like cheetahs, but the former ran a stride faster. Rivers took the win and the majority of the adoration. Emily smiled and waved through the praise and love the crowd showed the runner-up, but barely kept from falling into tears before Muller gently lead her away.

Nadia tried not to look at the despondent Emily as she went through her warm-ups: the forward lunges, the running in place, the Spiderman lunges, the bicycle kicks. *I wonder if I was less invested in this sport, I'd be more satisfied with losing?* Cheers boomed throughout the

stadium. *Put less of myself into practice, less of myself into exercise, and lose less of myself in the race.* She stretched out her arms, elbows popping. *But then awareness of my own laziness would crush me. There's no way to win.*

Muller came over to her. "Let's get ready."

Nadia clasped her hands together to keep them from trembling, nodded, and followed him to the track.

They went over to stand near the start line, she and the Coach loitering by the home straight beside the crowd. It always surprised her how loud people could be. Some chattered on their iPhones and others gossiped about the runners. Onlookers guzzled down cans of Pepsi and bottles of Poland Spring. Hundreds of sneaker pairs squeaked and scrapped across the pavement. Toddlers crunched into bars of Twix and Doritos chip while whining about the heat. A confused chorus of sound.

Nadia looked down the lanes to the waterfall line. The starter was already there, the starting gun gripped tightly in her hand. A few of the other runners were there too: Laticia Johnson from Abington High, Carla Free from Newman, Eun-ji Kwon from Retners, and Nneka Balogun from Saint's.

Then there was Nadia, biting her fingernails to a ragged mess, pacing back and forth.

Did I lock the door? Did I turn the stove off? Shit, I think I forgot to turn the stove off. Double shit I think I forgot to close the fridge. No, I'm sure the door closed. But if I slammed it shut it'll pop back open. Shit. If Mom's Greek Salad with the chicken croquettes goes bad, she'll kill me. Should I call her to close it? But she's already at work. But it's only a 15 minutes commute. But both ways it's half an hour. Does her lunch even last that long? Maybe I should-

"Nadia."

She jumped and turned to see Muller watching her.

"Yes, Coach?"

"How many times have you run a track?"

Nadia blinked. "What?"

"Give me an estimate."

"A few thousand?"

"Let's say 1,461. So why worry about 1,462?"

Nadia blinked. Then giggled. "Thanks Coach."

He patted her on the back. "Give them hell."

"I will." The announcer made the final call, and off Nadia went, jogging up to the starting line.

She turned back. "Coach?"

"Yes?"

"Watch me closely."

"I won't even blink."

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At the line, the runners were all quiet. Everyone here was experienced, but Nadia expected that they all were struggling with nerves and anxiety. Some jogged in place, others placed hands on their chest to steady their breathing, others did full body stretches to loosen up.

Focus. She did two sets of quadricep standing stretches, holding one her leg by the heel, then the other. She rolled her shoulders, cracked her knuckles, jumped in place. Slowly, she felt the stage-fright and anxiety fade and become a restrained, subdued excitement.

Soon the starter called them all to the line. Nadia stepped up to lane four, took a breath, and tensed herself. The announcer was saying something over the intercom. Friends from high school were calling her name. She could hardly hear either.

She bent down, eyes forward, taking in the curve of the lanes, the three girls ahead of her, the audience off to the side.

She wondered where her anxiety had gone. Did it get lost on its way to the starting line? An hour before she had been a broken mess, reading through the hues of regurgitated food to find some sort of comfort. Now she was like a caravel on a calm sea. Maybe it was finally being able to start, finally being able to go, rather than just wondering at what would happen.

She waited in the silence for the gun to go off, while listening to the familiar pre-race sounds.

The muted murmurs of the audience.

The quiet click of digital cameras.

The distant whoosh of cars down nearby streets.

The gentle *thump thump* of her heart.

Bang.

Nadia burst forward, taking long strides, keeping close to the inside of the lane.

A rapid clicking sound from behind her, then the runner from lane five, a red-haired girl from Coastline High, sprinted passed her, arms pumping through the air.

Bad pacing. Nadia resisted the innate urge to speed up, passing the break line and angling towards the inmost lane. The other girls did the same. In a few short seconds the runners had packed close. The sounds of the crowd dropped to the background, overshadowed by the click of eight pairs of track spikes against the mondo, and the measured breaths of the athletes.

Nadia upped her focus as the group closed in, controlling her strides, feeling a slight burn in her lungs. This was a good group, better than the ones she faced in the Weston Master's Meet. There was likely no one here with a speed under 2:07. Almost as good as she was a year ago.

The first girl she passed was a tall one, lengthy legs eating up distance. She flinched as Nadia pulled up beside her and tried to up her pace, but curbed her speed before she went into a sprint.

The runners passed four hundred meters with a number of students watching them from the field. Nadia focused on her breathing, inhalation and exhalation in beat with her footsteps. *In. In. Out. Out.*

The second girl she passed was flushed red, sweat cascading down her jawline, but was still far from fatigued, her breaths smooth and even. Eun-ji from Retner. Nadia pulled abreast, then pulled past, hamstrings aching as the runners hit six hundred meters.

The leader Sarah Fields continued to lead, not giving up first place as they finished the first lap. Onlookers cheered as she passed the waterfall line- clearly a crowd favorite.

But as the first lap continued, the leader lost ground as Nadia gained. As they came side to side, she glanced over at Nadia, and there was a moment when it seemed that she would increase her speed. But she relented and kept pace as Nadia pulled ahead, exhausted but giddy.

An even split never fails you.

A chorus of cheers sounded from the far bleachers- the students of Heartland High showing their love.

Fatigue burned through Nadia's body as she once again rounded the four-hundred-meter mark. Months of training only amount to a few extra seconds of speed on the lanes. A lot of work for what seemed to be little reward. But despite it, she was exhilarated, excited, feeling a smile across her face despite her heavy breathing. She was far ahead of the pack, no crowd to limit her stride. While she was just barely in first place, she could almost imagine that she had the track to herself, running alone, like on early Monday mornings, when she ran not to the cheers of an audience or the pop of a gun, but the trill of bluejays and the *whoosh* of her breathing.

There was a gasp from the crowd, that collective intake of breath that happened in response to an exceptional athlete. Nadia did not turn back and risk ruining her form, but she sensed the approach, the way household dogs can sense a coming earthquake.

She hit six hundred meters. *No more conserving stamina.* She kicked harder off the mondo, legs bursting across the lane. The finish line was close and getting closer, but she did not dare slow down. Pain burned across her body, from her air-starved lungs to her exhausted muscles, but she pushed them hard, then harder.

Nneka Balogun of Saint's Academy edged into her vision, first as a blur of motion on her periphery, then as an athlete running at her side.

Goddamnit! Nadia pushed harder but her body pushed back, her fatigue overwhelming her willpower. So, helplessly, she watched Nneka pull ahead, her braids trailing behind her head like satin ribbons.

No. Nadia slammed her feet into the ground.

Her body screamed *No!* but she screamed *No!* back. Hot air scorched her lungs. Sweat burned like acid down her skin. Nneka was only two strides ahead. Half a second ahead of her. After months of exercising and years of running, she would make that distance.

She did not remember tripping. One second she was running, and the next her face was against the mondo, watching feet pound past her, hearing the crowd scream and shout, tasting bitter blood and salty sweat on her tongue.

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They congratulated her afterwards, handing off pithy feel-good phrases. That everyone there witnessed the true level of her running. That fourth place was still a good place. That the results were not indicative of her worth. That accidents happen to everyone. Et cetera.

The Heartland team had been there for her. Long-distance runner Himiko had sobbed over what had happened, and Coach Muller had gathered Nadia in a brutal hug, whispering praises into her ear. Nadia received it all patiently, murmuring 'Thank you' and 'I appreciate it'.

"You did a great job." Muller said

Nadia smiled, the skin of her lips cracking and blood sluicing from the new wound. "A great job? Is that what that was?"

Muller hesitated. "Nadia..."

Nadia stepped back. "I need to go to the bathroom."

"Wait, Nadia!" he reached out for her but she had run into the crowd.

She stumbled through the mass of people, around a father with his son on his shoulders and a teen rolling on his longboard. It was so hot. Why was it so hot? The sun burned, and Nadia sizzled like bacon on the oven. Migranes writhed through her forehead. She placed a palm to her forehead and it made the pain worse.

She tripped over her feet, stumbling and nearly falling into a pregnant mother with her toddler in a stroller.

The mother swerved the stroller away. "What is wrong with you?"

"Sorry," Nadia said. She ran off, pushing back a group of girls from Atlantic High.

She ran and did not look back.

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It was hard to believe that despite being the stage for such a series of victories and defeats, the Heartland track stadium could be anything but chaotic. Yet here Nadia was, sitting in the bleachers second row with a Starbucks cappuccino in hand, listening to the morning ballad of thrushes and larks.

Her knee still ached, a steady rhythm of pain beating under a blood-soaked medical adhesive. It hurt less than the muscle-ache and air-deprivation after a strenuous run, but it was more annoying. It was a pain that did not go away after a few sets of deep breathing and a swig of Gatorade.

She sipped at her drink, its steam billowing across her cheeks. Down on the tracks, someone was doing laps. A long-distance runner, most likely. It was difficult to make out who it was from where she sat, but from his lanky build and greasy black hair, it seemed to be Jeremy Evans, winner of the 5000 meters at the last Forestone Invitational.

She squeezed tight around the styrofoam cup, lukewarm liquid spilling over the rim and across her fingers.

My vomit divination fell flat. Maybe I should have invested in astrology. She glanced up into the sky, where a corpse-pale moon and a set of silver stars could be seen between the cirrus clouds. "You wanna tell me why I suck so bad?" Nadia asked.

The stars and moon, taciturn bastards that they were, refused to respond.

Tears leaked from the corner of her eyes. She blinked hard, hard enough to hurt. *I hate this.*

"Mornings' have no love for me," a voice said from behind her.

She opened her eyes and turned to see Coach Muller approaching, in sweatpants and a Dick's Sporting Goods hoodie, rubbing his hands together.

"My career cursed me to be an early riser," he said as he sat beside her. "Every morning at 6:00 I'm up. Doesn't matter if I've set my alarm for noon. Doesn't matter if I was up till 4:00 in the morning thanks to successive nightmares. I'll always rise at the same time till the day I die of old age, cancer, or my aggressive pollen allergy." He cupped his hands and blew into them.

"The result is that I've watched a lot of morning shows. Interesting cartoons air that early in the day. There was one about this anthropomorphic zebra who was a beat-cop in an urban slum. Rated Y-7." He laughed. "The shit you see on TV."

"Hello, Coach."

"Ms. Hamdi." He nodded at her drenched hands. "You want a napkin for that?"

Nadia set the cup beside her and wiped the liquid on her T-shirt.

"No track suit today?" Muller asked. Nadia shook her head.

The two of them said nothing for a while. Down on the tracks, Jeremy rounded the curve, and jogged down the back straight, his form perfect despite the unavoidable fatigue.

"I fucking hate this," Nadia said.

Muller nodded. "It's the worst."

"I know I should be more confident." She said. "I know I've accomplished so much on the track. But when the event starts... I forgot all that. I feel like a toddler that's stumbled into an adult's world, and it's...it's..."

"It's not fair," Muller finished for her.

Nadia crushed the cup in her hand and let it fall to the floor.

Muller sighed and leaned back on the bench, which squealed underneath him. "You're an accomplished, driven young woman, and the farthest thing from naïve. So, I won't feed you platitudes. What I will do is tell you a story."

"When I passed the preliminaries and made it into the Olympics, I was beyond ecstatic. I made the cutoff for the 200 meters by only a few centiseconds, but I had done it. I had done what few athletes in the world had ever done. And afterwards, I was shipped off to Athens and did some training there. Exercises for speed, acceleration, stamina. Routines I'd imagine would make even the Spartans cry mercy. I interacted with a number of elite runners during this time. Dame Kelly Holmes. Veronica Campbell. Justin Gatlin."

"You knew Gatlin?" Nadia asked, mouth open.

Muller shrugged. "Only in passing. He kept to himself. Anyways, there was this one runner I met in the locker rooms. Thomas Bernard. He spoke some English and I spoke some French and we had a bit of a dialogue. It was typical uninteresting icebreaker stuff. How was the training? Do you miss home? Et cetera. But he was a slow runner, by Olympic standards. Slower than me. Only barely got a time of 21:00 for the 200 meters. As far as competition went, I put him out of my mind."

"Eventually, the day of the two-hundred meter arrived. I entered the Olympic Stadium, before the thousands of spectators filling the benches, and the millions behind the screens. The runners were called. I stepped up before the painted line. I steadied my breath. I prepared myself to run. And I came in second to last."

Muller cupped his hands and blew into them, misty breath slipping between his fingers. Nadia watched him, forcing herself to hold back her questions.

"Evans is quite the runner," Muller said at length, nodding down to the boy on the track. "Real dedication there."

Nadia fidgeted in place. Muller looked over to her and smiled.

"Back to my story. Anyways, I was crushed. Even after all the soul-crushing work and training I put into stand on this stage, it was not enough to win. I moped and watched as Gatlin

and others receive their pretty medals, while I was left with nothing but regret. I went to the locker room to be alone.”

“But then Bernard came into the locker room, smiling wide. I was angry, I lashed out at him, saying that we both did terrible. But then he said-“ Muller chuckled to himself a bit- “Pour simplement s’arrete sur la stage e’trit un success.”

Nadia blinked. “What?”

Muller punched Nadia’s shoulder playfully. “That simply being able to stand on this stage was a success.”

On the track, Jeremy had finished another lap. He stumbled towards the green before collapsing, spread-eagle.

“What is this supposed to mean to me?” Nadia asked.

Muller held up a finger. “It means that there’s more to running than that shiny first place medal. That every runner, from the shoe-in for victory to the one in last place, has put in effort to participate in that race.” He looked at her. “This holds especially true for Invitationals that only accept some of the best runners in the region.”

Nadia snorted, then wiped away the snot on her upper lip.

Muller smiled and held up another finger. “The second is to remind you that there is more to you than running. It is a vocation that demands much of you, that is certain. But when some, like me, balance the entirety of their self-value on the rickety foundation of this sport, when it collapses, we fall hard and break ourselves on impact.”

The wound on her knee was throbbing again. Nadia stretched her leg out, placing her foot on the bench before her, to see if it would lessen the pain. It did not.

“So what’s the moral here?” Nadia asked. “Don’t work hard, or you’ll be unhappy? Shouldn’t have us training two to three hours a day in that case.”

Muller sighed. “Why do you think you’ve been able to do what you have done? Get a time under 2:05?”

“Because-”

“Because you run well.” Muller said. “But why is that? It’s only because you’ve trained, and training is a hard thing. Hours of laps. Hours of exercise. Not something that can be done with glass-brittle will. Sometimes it took a sense of pride, sometimes shame, and sometimes outside support, but you made it onto the track. Running is the result of all that.”

Nadia thought on what he said. Down on the track, Evans had started up running again.

“Coach,” Nadia said.

“Yes?”

“Would it be okay for me to be alone for now? I wanted to head down to the lanes.”

Muller scratched at his stubble. “As long as you promise to exercise safely.”

Nadia nodded.

“Well.” Muller braced his hands on the bench and stood up with an audible crack. “Oh. That’s the back. If only we could grow younger.” He sighed. “I’ll see you later.”

As she watched him walk away, a thought crossed her mind. “Coach.”

He turned. “Yeah?”

“Do you regret what happened in Athens?”

Muller inclined his head. “I regret it. But I’m happy for it.”

Nadia nodded. "Thank you, Coach."
"Anytime and always, Nadia."

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She started from the waterfall line.

She took, halting, slow steps down the first 200 meters. Immediately tremors ran through her legs, down her arms, across her chest. *Slowly*. She placed her left foot down, deliberately touching the entire sole to the ground, from heel to toe.

Then the next step and the next step after that were taken with just as much care. With every foot press to the ground she felt a powerful urge to kick off, to shoot forward, to put her hamstrings and glutes to good use and burst down the center lane.

She took another step.

I wonder if this is how babies feel? Nadia took another step, pressing the toe of her sneaker to the ground.

At that moment Evans ran past her, huffing out clouds of cold air, sweat droplets flying from his pumping arms.

Nadia tensed. She felt herself lean into a crouch and her foot dig into the ground. Then she forced herself to freeze.

She watched Evans round the curve and move down the back straight.

She cracked her knuckles. Clapped her hands together. Then began to walk again.

It was a difficult experience. But eventually her slow pace no longer made her want to scream. Her body settled in a rhythm, a gentle pace. A walking-to-the-store pace. A stepping-down-the-stairs pace. An ambling-through-the-garden pace. A strolling-through the park pace.

There was no adrenaline rush, no running through the crowd, no pulling ahead, no sense of victory. There were no hasty breaths, no streams of sweat, no burning calves.

Nadia nearly laughed when she made it to the back straight. *I'm going so slowly*. She breathed cold air into her hands.

It was nice to not have to run.