

Miles would never forget his last sports day at the Queens Road Academy, but it would stick in his memory not for the usual reasons.

Not because he'd tripped over his shoelaces when Alexandria Grace-Mansford smiled at him.

Not because Matthew Blake had pulled his shorts down in the changing room or thrown his towel into the girls toilets while he was in the shower, and then proceeded to whip his buttocks with his own wet towel as Miles sheepishly tried to retrieve it.

Not because he'd come second to last in the 1500m race (just in front of Stephen Sidlow, who was asthmatic, a smoker, and only doing it because everyone else in his class was on a geography trip in the Brecon Beacons).

These things were quibbles in his memory now, all but forgotten, eclipsed as they were by the red-faced woman who strode across the playground towards him. Ms Arden, having been the only teacher inside the school and not out on the field shouting encouragement (friendly or otherwise), at the student participants, marched on him with dreadful purpose.

Miles had no trouble running a few laps of the field. In fact he rather enjoyed the chance to stretch his legs, and to get a little further away from Matthew Blake, and truth be known a good portion of his other classmates. What he didn't enjoy so much was having to run as a spectacle for the other nine hundred children at the school, cheering, jeering, booing, hissing, and shouting whatever they thought most amusing from the sidelines. Which was naturally, invariably offensive. Having waited all morning and most of the afternoon for his race, by the time he was called to the starting line he had already sweated through much of his shirt.

"Piles! Sweat much?"

"Yeah. Bit warm, mate?"

"Been swimming, Piles?! Piles thinks it's a triathlon! Where's your bike, mate?"

"Shut up, Dave."

As he crouched on the starting line, Miles' sweat patches felt as though they had seeped so wide they must by now have joined up, his face on fire, dripping into the dust and faded white paint. He had gotten off to a great start, holding third for a while and then pushing hard into second place. Only Nathan was ahead of him, but there'd be no catching him - he moved as though a pack of dogs was on his heel. Miles was little past the two hundred metre mark when he remembered that it wasn't a sprint. His thighs burned. He looked back to his class. Some were stunned into silence. Others were already cheering him on.

"G'wan Miles - get in!"

"Dark horse!" shouted Mr Baker, his P.E. teacher.

"Come on, Miles!"

He pushed on, momentarily deaf to his screaming muscles. A short way into the second lap, his throat seared with the effort of breathing, and his lungs were on the verge of collapse. A wind whipped up on the field and caught his breath. His mother's words came drifting back to him and he realised of a sudden why she had been right. *Pace yourself. Don't look back. You're only running against yourself.*

*Easy for her to say, he'd thought at the time, she wasn't stuck running the fifteen hundred metres.* His nerves often got the better of him. That was something she said, too.

The bell rang as he neared the end of what he guessed at as being lap three (by this time he'd lost most of his ability to gauge time, space and his memory of how far he'd come).

That was when he saw Arden crossing the empty playground. This would not usually have given him cause for concern, except that he saw her keenly scanning the field, her eye quite deliberately alighting on him. Had she caught him by accident? He tripped then. He pitched forward, steps suddenly twice as heavy as they pinched the dirt. *Look where you're going.* He slowed just enough to regain himself, but in the effort lost most of his momentum. There was no question of a late sprint. He was spent.

One by one the other runners edged past him, the gaps between them slowly widening to a chasm he would never close. The only one behind him now was Stephen, who seemed to have given up the notion of running entirely. Instead he stalked his lane, hands on hips, kicking a can feathered by the lawnmower. By the time Miles crossed the line, no one in his class was paying attention. Few were even left to see him cross it, snaking as they were in their twos and threes back across the playground and out of the gates.

Arden was deep in conversation with Ms Walker, his class tutor. Arden's eyes flashed at him and he wondered for a moment if he could feasibly get away with pretending he hadn't noticed. But again she held him in her gaze and he knew there was no chance. She had found him out. Of what, he couldn't tell, but it was something. The custard tart Greg had dared him to swipe from the canteen. Forgetting prefect lunch duty for second time that week. Still, he didn't feel like either of those things warranted the hiding it looked like he was about to receive. As Arden leaned in and told Ms Walker whatever the thing was, he saw the colour leave her face. Her hands trembled slightly. She smoothed the kinks in her dress in an attempt to conceal it. Not good, then.

Together they advanced on him from the edge of the field. His legs were ready to give way beneath him, his chest still apparently on fire. He kept walking, if only to stop himself collapsing.

"Miles," said Ms Walker firmly. "your father," was all she said.

*Jesus. What could be so bad they called him?* His father didn't even come to parents evening.

Arden escorted him primly back to the main hall in silence, almost all of the pupils having already vanished for the afternoon, as if they'd never been there at all. The click of heels echoed throughout the hall into the empty corridor, onto the carpet of the waiting room of Ms Ford's office. Arden stopped here, gestured him inside.

Ford was behind her desk. She watched, implacable, as he entered. Opposite her was a figure he could barely register at first. As they both rose, it struck him that it was his father, his hands fumbling and clasping each other as though both afraid the other might float away.

"Hey kiddo," he said, looking anywhere but at him. It was a meaningless name. What he called him when he didn't know what else to say. Ford left them. "You should probably sit," he said, gesturing to the chair. Miles didn't hear him. "Or don't. I don't know..." he trailed off.

Miles knew now. His breath was so loud of a sudden, his pulse throbbing in his head. He sat, lowered himself into his headteacher's chair to stop himself from falling, stave off his tears by doing something, anything. There could be a thousand reasons his father was here today, he thought, why his teachers were so grim-faced. But he knew there was only one. Something bristled at the back of his throat and he swallowed hard, choking it down.

"Dad," he said, and saw the smallest twitch of relief at his father's cheek. "What happened?"

He turned then, looked him in the eye.

"I'm sorry," he said. His voice creaked beneath the weight of the words. "She's gone."