

RUNNING

It wasn't fair, thought Emma Stickley as she stood in the empty lobby of Friendly Junction High School and looked out the window and fanned her sticky gym shirt as discreetly and as fast as she could to dry the pit stains in time; it wasn't fair that she had gym last period and had to show up all sweaty to cross-country practice.

Across the parking lot, Riley and Pip and Sarah Taylor were stretching in the muted sunlight. Sarah was wearing a pink sports bra and cute mesh shorts. She wasn't that pretty, but the boys liked her, probably, because she never wore a shirt and was too skinny. That's what Emma thought, anyway. But you could tell the boys liked her by the way they always tried to impress her at practice by acting like they were the leaders of the team and attempting to one-up each other's jokes. Emma laughed too, at their jokes when she heard them, even though she understood that they weren't meant for her. She wished she had cute shorts and didn't have to wear her mom's old sports bra, but she didn't own anything like that, she was new on the team,

so she wore the ugly school gym uniform instead, which was convenient for her given her schedule. The uniform consisted of a baggy gray shirt, with Emma's name written on the pocket in permanent marker, and maroon cotton shorts. It kind of reminded Emma of the uniform they made her cousin wear at the county jail. She was nervous to speak with Pip today, but full of hope. Today he was wearing a tight-fitting blue shirt and silky shorts that looked easy to touch. Emma had lost a lot of weight.

“Let's go Stickley!” Emma turned around, but it was only Coach. His flat face looked gray in the florescent light of the lobby, except his nose, which was a bright red; his square cheeks drooped. Emma couldn't help but glance, only for an instant, at his legs, as long and toned as the models' legs in the magazines, only his were hairy. It was weird to think, but they were very beautiful legs. Emma looked up from Coach's legs into his sad gray face and she smiled a big warm smile that felt only a little forced, but Coach—Coop, rather, everybody called him Coop—he just stared at her, wrinkles crawling down his skull. “Hustle up,” he said wearily as he passed her and went out to the parking lot. His breath smelled like alcohol, but it probably wasn't that, because Coop was a teacher. Cooper himself was aware that his breath smelled liked alcohol, and he was thinking to himself about how he needed to drive very slowly. “C'mon, let's go, hustle up,” he repeated as the door was closing behind him. “Okay!” Emma said. She wanted to please him, if only because it seemed like he was a little sad, so she hustled up very earnestly. The air outside was chilly and brittle; the clouds were verging on rain.

Outside, Riley was teasing Sarah about the goose bumps on her arms. Sarah was laughing cautiously and Pip was looking elsewhere so that he didn't have to look at Sarah, who was especially beautiful today against the gray sky shot through with gold. Upon seeing Coop appear on the other side of the parking lot with Sticks trailing behind him, Riley grinned wickedly and

gave a little chortle and lunged like a ferret, lanky and fleet of foot, and ribbed Pip, who laughed and playfully punched at Riley and told him to knock it off. Pip had just made the mistake of telling Sarah and also Riley, who was his friend but a bigmouth, that Emma had given him a note “declaring her love for me,” as he had put it with grand intonation and a bitter grin, which he really shouldn’t have done because Emma was a nice girl and having a hard time as it was. Pip felt guilty and sad for Emma, she could never find out that he had told anyone, not ever. But Pip was also excited by the thought that Sarah would know that another girl liked him and that, moreover, he had the luxury of not taking her seriously.

“She thinks you’re a ‘scholar and a gentleman,’ eh Pip old chap?” Riley sneered, quoting from the love letter Pip had read aloud and glancing at Sarah, who looked hot in her sports bra even though she had small tits. “It’s that ridiculous name of yours that’s done it to her,” he went on in his imitation of the British accent he had heard on TV. “The Honorable Judge Honor Roll, Viceroy of the Violin! Oh, you lucky douche! Yes, she fancies you have fine etiquette and a little butler in your pocket who wipes your ass for you and—yes, Stickley can be your walking Stick! for your *promenade* about the park, old chap! Well, she can’t very well be your running Stick, that much we know. Your walking log, at any rate.” Riley laughed at his worldly piece of wit, and enjoyed how dominant over Pip he looked in front of Sarah.

“Be nice,” Sarah said obligatorily, even though she was laughing at the accent Riley had put on, the way he was strolling lankily with exaggerated curviness of step, with his nose high in the air. Sarah thought Emma was a loser, but everyone should be nice. Emma was a loser first because she always followed where she wasn’t wanted (thank God Emma had the B lunch and not the A lunch or she would try to go with them to town every day), and second because she always asked people to repeat what they had said, even though she had missed it because she

wasn't supposed to catch it in the first place. Emma had proven herself a contemptible runner these past two weeks who never rewarded your cheering with effort, and whenever you talked to her all she did was complain or talk about the Jonas Brothers or gossip about other girls. But, Sarah reflected, Emma *had* taken most of the blame when, two weeks ago, Sarah and her friends and Emma were caught in the back of the school library drinking vodka and coke out of a coke bottle. So Sarah *had* to be nice to her. And maybe they could be friends after all. Emma would be fun to watch at the dance clubs.

Following Sarah's nice lead, Pip said to Riley, "I should've known you'd be a dick about this, I shouldn't even have told you about the letter: give you an inch, you always take eleven more to compensate for your micro-cock."

"Oooh," Sarah laughed, hoping that the boys would continue sparring because she knew that they were doing it for her. Riley laughed because he got way more pussy than Pip did and so could afford to laugh. "Emma has a big heart, she really does," Pip added with sensitivity and compassion.

"Of course she does, how else is she gonna keep that big ass of hers oxygenated!" Riley hissed, for Coop and Sticks were almost within earshot now. "Ah, all the more heart for you to break, old chap. Remember, though, that you're her second choice—behind Joe Jonas." Glancing at Sarah, who was obviously becoming bored with the subject, Riley added: "No, you're right, she's a nice girl. But..." He began strolling with his exaggerated curve of step again, and pantomimed swinging about what must have been a walking log. Sarah laughed and covered her mouth.

“Alright, hustle up, circle round,” Coop yelled in a hoarse voice as he walked up. “Quit playing patty-cake with yourself and get your ass over here Pip...Riley, whatever your name is. If you’re going to suck at this sport, you might as well take sucking a little more seriously.”

Riley laughed. He was the fastest runner on their terrible little team and so could afford to take Coop’s abuse in stride. Everybody else laughed too, but that was because Coop’s honesty made them nervous.

Emma made a point, as everyone circled up, of not making a point of trying to stand next to Pip. She was nervous and excited for something new to happen, but she couldn’t let him know that. As Coop was telling the team what their practice would consist of for the day, a thirty-minute run through town, the Friday cool-down, Emma glanced up at Pip with shy hopefulness in her eyes, as if to say, ‘Tread softly, tread softly.’ Yeets was an inspirational writer. Maybe Pip hadn’t noticed her glance up at him, he was a hard worker and was probably focusing on what Coop was saying. Sarah was standing with her hands on her hips, and so was Emma, but, as she, Emma, looked around at her teammates, she noticed that Riley was staring at her armpits. Looking down, she saw that she still had stains there. She looked back up to Riley, who had looked away and wasn’t even grinning. Emma was very grateful to him, he could be a gentleman sometimes, even though he was mostly an asshole. Coop had his hand on Sarah’s shoulder. She looked very short in consequence, like his daughter.

Suddenly the whistle blew and everybody was running, and what had Coop said? Emma didn’t remember, but it didn’t really matter, either. Emma hated this part. She always tried to keep up with the others, in the beginning, despite the fact that her shorts kept sagging and the air pricked her lungs like icy shrapnel and her breasts bounced up and down in her mom’s sports bra and chaffed and hurt. But soon Sarah would be in the lead, because she was the fastest, Emma

thought, and Riley and Pip would run next to each other some distance behind Sarah, and soon they would be just little specks marking on the low horizon how far behind Emma was, how much distance she had to make up and how much time she had lost, because Emma was always last.

It was nice to be alone though, like this, without anyone watching. Emma liked the thought that she had so much room for improvement, and she looked forward to the day when she would be like Sarah, if not better than Sarah, who was too skinny to be healthy, really. Emma would think about how much more she would improve than Sarah after just one run, and this thought fueled her as the taste of iron suffused her mouth. *Push it*, she told herself, echoing what Sarah and Pip and Riley cried out, cheering her on toward the end of some of the non-Friday practices, *push it!* But when the side stitch seized her trunk—maybe it had been fifteen minutes, was she halfway done?—Emma couldn't push it anymore, she felt wounded, and it was that that reminded her how much she hated that she had to run at all. She took her phone out of the pocket of her shorts: it had only been four minutes! Why didn't Sarah just admit that *she* was the one who brought the alcohol to school? Because she'd get suspended from cross-country races and kicked out of student counsel, that's why. Because she was selfish.

Sarah would have let everyone get in trouble if it hadn't been for Emma. It was when the principal, red in the face at this point and with a little bead of saliva trapped in a dent in his lower lip—it was when he threatened to suspend everyone if no one came forward that Emma at last came forward, because she was going to get suspended anyway and might as well make her friends grateful to her for doing it. She came forward and admitted that she had brought the alcohol from home. The principal seemed surprised for an instant, suddenly not so angry, and then not surprised at all but very calm. He had told Emma, in a sad voice, that she was very

brave: it was easy to do bad things when we thought our peers would be impressed, and it was hard to do the right thing when it meant standing up alone. These words, and the principal's leniency, made Emma smile with relief and joy and the feeling that the principal really admired her. He had given her detention for two weeks, but had told her that, just between them, he would halve the punishment if she took up an extracurricular activity.

So now she was running. And the stitch racked her on her own body. She squeezed where it hurt and was disgusted by how much flab she grabbed and made a little moan audible only to her. She felt like a wounded, persecuted animal, looking up at the sky verging on rain but withholding, almost as if to insist that practice not be canceled but that Emma should run in this cramped life till she drop from exhaustion. Why was it so easy for the others, as though they felt no pain, but so difficult for her? She felt delirious, like the only thing she wanted was to stop, even though she had to keep going before she stopped, lest the others see her and shout and shake their heads and laugh behind her back. Well, running wasn't that bad, but Emma really did hate it. She looked to her right at the open field of weeds breezily shimmering, at the little red brick National Bank, at Mt. Garfield, which had the same funny name as the lazy cat in the cartoons, but that, if you didn't think about the name, was, in itself, very beautiful. And Emma slowed down to a busy-looking walk and everything felt so much better. She was hardly sweating at all.

Coach never checked up with them on their runs, so Emma could take out the iPod she had hidden in her sports bra as she pleased and the headphones she had hidden in the elastic band of her shorts and listen to music, even though that was against the rules, because you couldn't run a race with headphones in, Coach had said. But running was so boring and painful all at once, Emma hated it but she had to do it, so she might as well distract herself while she did. As she ran

past the side street on which her mom and stepdad lived, in an ugly green house with a broken grill out front and a mangled vinyl chaise lounge in which her mom liked to stretch out all fat and gross and smoke while the baby played in the scraggly grass... But Emma was never going to live in a house like that because she was going to be either an actress or a newswoman on TV. She put on her headphones and turned on the radio.

The Jonas Brothers were playing. Emma was at once excited again about Pip, and her heart rested on the easy, beautiful words, which were like what she imagined the wake of a boat in warm Hawaii water would be like:

*Now I'm speech-less,
Over the edge,
And just breath-less,
I never thought that I'd
Catch-this
Looove-bug again.*

Emma knew exactly what they were talking about! The song was her soul. She told everyone that she was going to marry Joe Jonas someday, which she might have really thought when she was a little girl, but now she just said that so people knew that she was confident and wanted something special from life. Who she really loved was Mike, Mike Farrell. He knew how to treat a girlfriend, you could tell by how strong and confident he was, how he was always polite to everyone. His letter jacket sparkled with the most merit. His jaw was square and he had a little boy's cheeks and his breath always smelled sweet, because he chewed tobacco. It wasn't all that good that he chewed tobacco, because that was what the kids from the farms did and not the kids from town, who drank and smoked cigarettes instead, but it was an endearing vulnerability in Emma's mind, a bad habit she would tease him about even though she secretly liked it. Emma had asked Mike out one day at school, and he had been very sweet and honest. He was already seeing someone. This made Emma think that he would be a good boyfriend more than ever

before, because he was faithful no matter what. Joe Jonas was very dreamy, but Emma had never even met him, so it was silly even to think about it, even though she did sometimes and it was harmless.

If not Joe or Mike, why not settle for Pip?

The words of the song repeated, but were even more moving this third time, because they were familiar now, like old friends (Emma sang aloud to them), and because the song, in repeating, was like a happy thought that never needed to end. Running was so easy to this music, when you were walking. Emma wanted to share her good feeling with somebody, especially on this gray day when everybody would probably be a little depressed. She took her phone out of her pocket and cycled through all the friends she had in her contact list. She wanted to send a message to Pip, because the Jonas Brothers song had reminded her of him, how she had caught the lovebug for him even though she really liked Mike, because Pip was not as strong as Mike and kind of nerdy but he was also very polite and also soft-spoken and gentle and he didn't have a girlfriend and Emma was realistic, she knew he was in her league and, if she asked with all her heart, he would probably say yes to her. But she knew that if she texted Pip, she might make him think she was needy like so many girlfriends she had heard about, which she wasn't. So she decided to text Riley instead, because he would show the message to Pip, who would appreciate the good feeling of the message, without thinking her needy. So as she walked along the asphalt past the Conoco gas station she texted Riley a different Jonas Brothers lyric, "Burnin' up," followed by a smiley-face emoticon. The quote was perfect because it was kind of about running, too.

Suddenly, Emma heard a car coming from behind her. She stepped off the road and glanced back. It was a beat-up red truck which Emma recognized to be Coach's truck. He was

driving very slowly, and Emma knew he was looking for her—but he couldn't have know that she had been walking and not running. He probably wasn't looking for her, then, even if he might stop to talk to her. So she ripped her head phones off and stuffed them down into her waistband and all as she started jogging again down the road, but it was all for nothing, really, because Cooper didn't even stop or honk, he just kept on driving very slowly down the road into town.

Practice must be over then, Emma thought. It should have just rained and gotten it over with! So Emma fished up the headphones from her waistband, put them in to listen to music, and she turned around and breathlessly started walking again back toward the school, becoming more and more excited to talk to Pip, at last, as she did so. Maybe he would even kiss her today. And it was okay if not, because she could wait, she just wanted to be with him.

But the parking lot was desolate when Emma finished walking the mile or so back; Pip's little blue Honda was gone. She saw her own car—and there was something under the windshield wipers, it was a piece of paper. Emma's heart raced as she ran over to her car, she felt over the edge and breathless. She snatched the paper out from under the wiper, but ripped off a little corner of it as she did so. This worried her, because Pip had gone to all the trouble of writing her back and now she had ripped what he had given her, but it was okay because she had only ripped a corner of it without any writing, which fluttered away in the light autumn breeze like a little white leaf.

Emma skimmed the letter as fast as she could and caught very little of what it said. But she had caught enough to know that Pip didn't want to be her boyfriend. Her heart sank, and she returned to the top of the letter and read it again, slowly:

Dear Emma (Pip had written),

I'm very glad that you wrote to me about how you feel. Your letter was very sweet and I'm lucky to have a friend like you. I do not think I deserved a lot of your praise, but that shows me that you see in me things even I don't, which is what I want in a friend, and what I want to be able to do for my friends.

But, Emma, I can't be your boyfriend, because I don't feel for you the kind of feelings you feel for me. There isn't any accounting for this. I'm so sorry.

If you ever want to talk, about anything, please know that I'm always here. Sarah told me you've had a hard time lately, with the library thing, but you don't have to go through it alone.

Sincerely,
Pip

Emma, crying, crumpled up the letter and held it gently, tremblingly in her upturned hand like a living wounded bird. She had told him that she loved him, that she thought he was the most special person she had ever met, so smart and kind, and he had said what everybody always says, which could never be enough. Why was it always now that boys promised to always be there for you? and why weren't they ever there? Emma was hurt that she was alive, that she was only herself and only for a little while, and that nothing special would ever happen to her. How could it be that people only live once, one precious once, only for everything to be sweaty and hard and cramped and disappointing? Emma looked up at the sky, which had been verging on tears all day, but it wouldn't rain, and this realization made Emma sob harder and choke on her sobs. The sky wouldn't even rain with her.

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