

Altitude

He slammed a four-pound maul against the flattened head of the hardened steel chisel sending a sheet of linoleum across the room like a flying saucer and ten thousand cockroaches scattering. Time is money, and Drew measured both by the amount of work he finished. He'd measured the morning by removing plaster and lathe from the second floor walls with his sledgehammer and crowbar down to its stud skeleton, took a half-hour to refuel with a burrito he bought for lunch at Wawa, and then stripped the linoleum off the kitchen floor. He figured it was three o'clock. Another hour ripping the sheathing off of the joists and it would be time to get picked up.

He wedged the chisel in the seam between two sheets of sheathing, wound the maul over his head and swung with every ounce of restrained fury just as a crash launched wood molding and pieces of the splintered front door across the room. A brass hinge slid across the dining room floor followed by four crouched bodies, a gun extended in front of each of them. Drew cowered in the corner between the refrigerator and the stove praying with every ounce of his strength to keep his body still. Two of the intruders disappeared upstairs and one ran through the kitchen and down the cellar steps. The largest of them walked through the living room fanning his weapon from side to side making his way into the kitchen. He eyed Drew in the corner and fixed his gun on him. Drew saw a badge fixed to the guy's belt and dreaded that he'd just lost his job, his ticket out of the shelter he lived in off of Broad Street in center city, and if they checked his papers, deportation.

"Clear!" came from upstairs. "Clear!" came from a female voice in the basement.

The cop in the kitchen motioned with his gun for Drew to stand. "Where's Marino?"

Drew shook his head. "I don't know Marino, Officer."

The cop rolled his eyes. "Okay, one more time."

Drew's voice shook. "A man picks me up in the morning, drops me off, gives me job, and leaves. He comes back at the end of the day, pays me, drives me back to Home Depot. Says his name is Guy."

The cop shoved his gun into his holster, and grabbed two hands full of Drew's shirt. "Guy?" he laughed. "So that's way you want to play it?"

Drew squeezed his eyes shut and saw the black of the night when the militia stormed his home in Sudan, dragged his father into the center of the village with the other men. He shuddered at the long ago blast their firearms, still felt the hot blood from the mass execution.

"Relax." Drew opened his eyes at the sound of the female. She was Hispanic. A tattoo on her gun wrist. Her face stern in a way that let him know he was okay. "We're not Immigration."

Drew looked into the living room and didn't see INS on the back of the other officers' jackets. He'd never even heard of INS until three months after the election, the night Gil had taken him to dinner and they raided the shelter. The new President promised to clamp down on people with a criminal record in the country illegally, but they herded away his immigrant friends, record or not.

Drew didn't realize his feet were off the ground until the guy let him go. He took a deep breath.

"We're after your boss," she said. "What'd you say his name is?"

"He tells me his name's Guy, but I hear him on the phone say 'this is Tony' to whoever he's talking to."

"That's our man," said the big cop like he'd just won a hand of blackjack. "You say the asshole drives you home?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Go stakeout the parking lot," he shouted to the two guys in the living room, then turned back to Drew. "Looks like you got the rest of the day off."

"He owes me pay?" Drew shot back louder than he meant to.

The cop shrugged his shoulders. "I guess Tony fucked you as a going away present."

"Fuck that," said the girl. "What's he pay you?"

"Thirty a day."

"Fuckin' dirtball," said the big guy.

“That asshole will be loaded when we grab him,” she said to her partner, then looked at Drew. “You get time and a half today, Hombre.”

Drew followed them out the door. “How do I get home?”

She looked back at him. “Where do you live?”

“Philly.”

“That dirt bag brings you all the way out here from Philly?”

Drew nodded.

“Sorry, buddy,” said the big guy. “Gonna have to bus it.”

Drew trekked an asphalt desert, white paint outlined thousands of empty parking spaces separating him from a mall to the distant left. A glass bus enclosure was out on the road in front of him, and across the road a circus train of strip malls and fast food joints. He’d always felt safe on the move, ever since the day at fifteen his mother made him flee their village. The savages had executed all the men, and they started recruiting male children as boy soldiers, young girls as their sex slaves. She charged him with his little sister to follow thousands of others, but after four weeks through the scorching desert Drew, always the contrarian, veered west while the Lost Boys continued on to Kenya.

He had no idea where the bus would come from or where it would take him, or even if a bus still traveled this route since the shed was empty. He calculated the afternoon while he walked: the cops breaking down the door, arresting his boss and then paying him out of boss’ pocket added up to 4:15. He couldn’t shake Gil’s last words to him yesterday on their final training run for his first track meet since joining the shelter running program, *5:30 at Broad and Porter. Don’t be late.*

Drew stood in the bus enclosure alone, waiting. His eyes widened when he saw the marque above a bus windshield coming down the road. The bus slowed and opened its doors. “You going to Philly?” He shouted up the steps.

“Norristown,” said a sturdy black woman sitting behind the wheel. “Then regional rail to Center City.” Drew estimated twenty minutes to Norristown, a transfer and probably another forty-five minutes into town, and then run up Broad Street to meet Gil at Popular Street. Gil would wait fifteen, maybe twenty minutes.

“I don’t have all day, Honey,” she said.

He climbed the steps. “How much?” he asked jiggling the change under the bills the cops took from his boss.

The doors swooshed closed. She pulled out onto DeKalb Pike, her eyes alternating from the road to Drew and back to the road. “You a senior?”

Drew smiled at the question, recognizing her singsong West Indies accent, his last stop on his way to settle in the US. Only a native eye could see the hard years masked by his fine dark skin and through a countenance that defied the uncounted miles he’d traveled in life, more than a thousand walking from Sudan through Ethiopia to the Somali coast, the shortest leg in his long journey.

“No,” said Drew.

The bus slowed at the next stop. “Step aside,” she said corralling him to the side with her arm to make way for a half-dozen passengers. She closed the doors and pulled away. “You look like a senior to me, Sweetie,” she said with a wink. “\$1.00.”

Drew dropped a dollar in the box, nodded his appreciation and said, “Thank you.” He walked to a seat in the middle of the bus. It was more difficult for him to tell time without his built-in timepiece measuring labor against achievement. He reconstructed the end of his workday adding the time it took to trek from the house he demoed and wait for the bus and figured it was probably close to 4:30. He still had to make a connection, catch the train, and a run to meet Gil at 5:30. It would be close.

The bus filled more at each stop, mostly shoppers, a few business people and students. A businessman in the seat across the aisle from him raised his newspaper in front of his face and shimmied closer to the window. Drew opened his dirty hands, brushed plaster dust and grime off his clothes, then nodded at him and smiled.

The bus decelerated and eased into a lot, stopped next to a concrete platform in front of a rail line. He waited for passengers to file to the front before he got up, then made his way up the aisle. He stopped at the driver. “You said this train will take me downtown?”

“Nothing wrong with our memory, Baby,” she said, pointing to the platform.

“You know how long it takes to get to center city?”

“About forty-five minutes, Dear.”

Drew walked down the steps looking around and didn't see a train coming in either direction. He spotted a billboard in a field of high grass near the edge of the parking lot, threw his backpack over a shoulder and ran. He ducked behind the billboard, unzipped his bag and changed into his running gear, then jogged back to the platform and stood waiting among the growing rush hour crowd.

Air breaks whooshed the train to a stop and when the doors opened commuters hurried to fill seats in nearby cars. Drew walked through the doors in front of him to a spot in the aisle, lowered his backpack between his feet and held onto the rail above him. The train jerked from the station and he closed his eyes, swaying with the list and roll that reminded him of his voyage across the Mediterranean on boat with a rusted hull. He never believed life would one day be so easy, standing in the aisle of a train that soldiers wouldn't board and usher passengers off to prison, living under a regime so ruthless he didn't have time to even grieve the loss his father or to miss his mother. He looked around at men in suits and women in dresses and wondered if any of them had ever survived a capsized boat like the one that toppled in a storm ten miles off the coast that still caused him to wake sweating in the middle of the night thirty years later, flailing his arms in the corner cot of a shelter on Broad Street desperately searching for his little sister but instead coming up with a pillow that was a lifesaver he clung to for three days before a fishing boat rescued him and took him to land, his first stop in a decades-long odyssey.

A woman bumped into him as she walked to exit. Drew opened his eyes and said, "Excuse me." She gave him an indignant look.

It felt about 5:30 to him and even if Gil waited for fifteen or twenty minutes he'd still never make it in time. Then he remembered Gil mentioning that the track meet was at 6:00 in Manayunk. He edged to a map by the door and traced the train route with his eyes. He brightened when he saw Manayunk Station midway to center city. The sign at the next stop read Main Street. Five stations to go. The train doors closed and it picked up speed, slowed, more passengers exited. Next stop Conshohocken, a familiar sounding town on the Schuylkill River, closer to Philadelphia, a lot of hills. Two more stations passed before the Ivy Hill stop. After people got off and the doors closed he shuffled closer to the exit. As the doors opened a young woman sitting across from the exit

reached down and grabbed her shoulder bag and in a sweeping motion a small black purse dropped onto the floor as she stood and walked off the train. “Miss,” said Drew but she didn’t hear him. He ducked between commuters, grabbed the purse and ran after her. “Miss!” he called. She turned at the moment a thirtyish-looking guy with a short-cropped beard wearing a black suit grabbed Drew’s shoulder. She looked at Drew holding the purse toward her and at the guy with a handful of his shirt.

“You dropped this,” said Drew.

“He was trying to rob you!” the guy shouted.

A small crowd gathered, in the center Drew holding the purse toward the girl, the man towering over them. She looked up at the big guy and in an indignant tone said, “Let go of him.” She took the purse from Drew and thanked him. “Let me give you something,” she said, opening the purse.

“No, no, please,” he said, and in the same breath added, “but could you tell me where the track is?”

“The track? she laughed. “Like a running track?”

Drew laughed. “Yes”

“The only one I know of is on Pechin Street,” she said.

“Could you tell me how to get there?”

“Sure.” He followed her gaze to the other side of the platform and saw nothing but rooftops. “It’ll be easier if we go down to the street,” she said.

Drew followed her down the stairs and they walked out onto Green Street. She pointed up a windy hill and said, “Follow this street until you get to Pechin and turn left. You’ll see a track on a hill a few blocks away. You can’t miss it.”

Drew offered his hand and she extended her’s. He pressed it gently and looking into her eyes, he said, “Thank you,” then tightened the straps on his backpack and took off up Green Street. It was his first time in Manayunk, but he knew of its hills from hearing people talk about The Wall, the steepest hill on the Philly Cycling Championship route that cyclists compared to grades in the Alps of the Tour de France. He picked up his pace not knowing that Green Street ran parallel to The Wall just a few streets to his right. His lungs burned the way they did trekking the highlands of Ethiopia in 100-degree heat. Drew loved the hills. They were his teacher. He’d attack them chanting, “Make the hills

you friend, they will never let you down.” He learned from them that once you acclimate to altitude, life anywhere is easy. But the thing he loved most about the highlands was the view.

He came to the street sign for Pechin and looked to his left. On a hill a few blocks away were red brick grandstands. He broke into a three-quarter sprint that defied the half-mile he’d just run up Green Street, as if the day he’d spent demoing a house, the police raid and the commute from a distant suburb never happened. A block from the track he saw Gil’s Jeep in the parking lot and quickened his pace even more.

Volunteers with the homeless running program were mostly students or young professionals. Drew gravitated toward Gil, a retired roofer. They partnered on long runs and told one another stories. He’d laugh at Gil’s tales about growing up in an Irish Catholic neighborhood in Southwest Philly with an Irish pub on nearly every corner, a world away from being raised in a one-room hut in Sudan. Gil never told Drew that he did five years at Graterford Prison for running arms to the IRA during The Troubles and Drew never mentioned the militia. Besides running, neither thought they had anything in common.

He rounded the fence and when he passed through the gate he spotted his team at the far end of the track wearing green shirts the running program had given them over hand-me-down shorts and an assortment of shoes. He broke into a full sprint toward the huddle of runners, Gil standing in the center filling out the roster. One of the runners shouted, “Drew!” pointing toward the middle of the track. They all turned and parted to let him run into the center of the scrum. Out of breath, he leaned over and put his hands on his knees. A smile widened on his face and he straightened back up. “Sorry I missed my ride, Mister Gil.”

Gil laughed. “What do you mean, Drew? I just penciled you in at anchor in the relay.” Anchor, the position reserved for a psychologically fit runner who could not be intimidated, and one strong enough to chase down a competitor in the final stretch.