

The Race is Not Given

Part I

Ecclesiastes 9:11

I returned and I saw
under the sun, that the race
is not given to the swift,
nor the battle to the strong . . .
but time and chance happens to them all.

Chapter 1

I Returned

Naked, he ran hard. The black cinder track sizzled, like the hot iron skillet when his momma fried bacon. The stadium was full with faces he knew. His momma, pretty brown, smiling tensely through fears that her baby might not make it. Bro Max, bragging, talkin' trash, like he was back home, holding court on the streets of Freeport. 'Ton and KK, cheering, raising their fists, urging him on. Sheila, Maxi and Leah were there too, laughing, mocking, or seeming to pretend he wasn't there, sweatin' like hell, haulin' ass. His father was absent.

He always awoke from the dream dripping with sweat and burning or bone dry and cold. Afterwards, regardless of the time of night, he couldn't return to sleep. He'd sit up in his bed. Write in his journal or pen a letter to Max or Sheila—a letter that could never be sent, in either case. Max, his best friend, track team partner and rival, was dead. Sheila, his ex-wife, was somewhere on the planet; where, he didn't know. They'd "lost touch with each other," her choice. Afterwards, he hummed songs about running. From childhood: "Run, run, as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man." From church: "Lord, I'm runnin', tryin' to make a hundred, ninety-nine and a half won't do." From Max's beloved Bahamas: "We rushin', we rushin', we rushin' through the crowd. We rushin', we rushin', we standin' tall 'n proud." Afterwards, he'd close his eyes, and sing softly, like his momma used to do. He'd imitate a soul singer, Al Green, Billy Paul, Marvin Gaye, someone from the seventies, ten, twelve years ago, and remember a party, a date, a good time, and then be glad he'd come home. Home. Nowhere else he ever lived was home, not the two years in Nebraska following college; not the three in Cali with Sheila; not the several after that, by himself, in PA. Nowhere else he'd ever been, or would ever be, was home, but here, his hometown, Buffalo, NY. No other house but this one, 253 Mason Avenue, felt right all the time, even when things, like now, were wrong. Nowhere else could he awake from his nightmares and so readily remember good things; nowhere else could he run from them and forget why he returned home.

He was diagnosed with cancer. Dr. Parker, his first doctor in Harrisburg said, "I'm going to be straight with you, big fella. The cancer is possibly terminal. There's a 50-50 chance. We can try to burn or poison it out, and after that, there's nothing more we can do." So, he took the treatments. Radiation. Chemo. Burning out the disease, poisoning it. Taking the treatments, for months at a time, sickened him, weakened him. It just wasn't about losing his hair or sense of taste or appetite. And, it just wasn't about dropping 55 pounds during four months of treatment, so that he was made weak not simply from the radiation or the drugs, but from a less fit body than he before he began. It was about taking treatments so he could die. The first time he walked into the hospital's radiation room, he was greeted by 10, 15 other patients, all raising their heads upwards, in unison, as another walking wounded joined the company. They were surrounded by a cloud of smoke, heavy, like the fog of a dreary morning. When he said to the woman sitting next to him, awaiting treatment, that smoking is bad for your health, she replied dryly, "What difference does it make now, anyway, sugar?" It was as though the patients submitted to the burning, cutting, or poisoning of the cancer without any real belief that it would work. His doctor was right, "50-50." Then Stan found Dr. Goldstein, an expert in chemo, and this treatment wiped out the disease totally, or so they thought. But recently, the cancer returned. Stan obeyed, and went back into treatment. Journeyed back to the place, the awful place, where he felt betrayed by his body, but betrayed also, by the treatment to cure his body. And so, after months of more treatment, in this the second year of his life with cancer, a horrible marriage with no possibility of divorce, he began to question the doctors. Not that what they were doing was wrong, but that perhaps, there was a better way, a way which was more right for him. He read everything on health and nutrition and drugs. But he'd stopped working out. Stopped, because he lacked the strength to do so. And then, one day, he began experimenting with herbs and vitamins, based on his reading, trying, "here a little, there a little," like Elder Mitchell, his father's pastor, preached. He began to work out again, the same as when he was in school, walking the distances he used to run; decreasing the weight lifted in half, but doing the same old things again. He persisted with the cancer treatments, but they didn't make him feel as bad as before. He felt better, felt, not that the doctors failed, but that he was succeeding. It was wild, this cancer. Getting this dreaded disease opened him up to a new side of life, of living. Perhaps the fear of death gave him greater courage to live. And so he decided to move back home. Not just to get away from Goldstein and the treatments which he was going to try to live, or die, without, but also because he could find there, in his parents' house, what no other place in America could offer him, another culture, another country. When he contracted the disease, was informed of it, he thought long and hard about how it happened to him: heredity, environment, habit? He didn't know. In part, he blamed the culture. In part, he blamed the dog-eat-dog way he lived his life, especially after Sheila, trying to best, compete with, his vanished ex-wife. He wanted to better her so she could see, in her absence, his worth. It was like buying a present for a dead person. Worse. The job in Harrisburg was a result of this attitude, Assistant Director to the President of a program for wayward, poor, "at-risk" youth. It was the type of job where, if he played his politics right, he would eventually move up. And if he didn't, he would be able to move out, into another similar program, as president or director, as big-money head. They hired him because of his track background, figuring it would impress the kids; and also, Stan thought, because they couldn't afford to hire a bigger-name ex-jock. But he left the job and the future and even, in some way, the present, and entered into a tuneless zone, where jobs and money didn't matter. The future didn't matter. Nothing mattered but his plan for the future, a future he calculated second by

precious second. He returned home, to the culture, the country of his parents' house, he dared not call it a home, because here, he could work his plan and not worry about money or time. He took a major cut in pay, approximately 20,000 dollars, but that didn't bother him, really, he didn't need that much money anyway. It was crazy, what he was doing, leaving the advice of the experts, the physicians, and going on his own. But weren't they the ones who informed him, once he began working out his own cure, that "you look better, Stan; you seem to be taking to the treatments this time." But it wasn't their treatments; it was his: ginseng and bee pollen and vitamins and royal jelly and distilled water and other herbs. It wasn't their treatments; it was a change in lifestyle-a questioning of everything, from where he worked-he hated the job, anyway, the politics of it; the only part he missed was the kids-to what he ate. He studied the label of everything he ate; prepared almost everything he ate; and seemed almost crazy, to himself, in his obsession. But it was like he was taking on the culture, a cancerous culture, really, one in which it was a surprise that everybody didn't contract the disease. It was no surprise to him that black men were a leading group of cancer sufferers. His plan was to hone his body into such good shape, that it would fight the cancer, the same kind of shape it was in when he ran track. He aimed to prove them wrong-the doctors and all of those in the stadium of his nightmares. The doctors were right, his night-mares said, just like other naysayers were right about his life, his dreams. The doctors were wrong, his life and breath said. He returned home to die; no, rather, he returned home to live. The doctors didn't think it was possible. How did they know that was possible? He quit his job in Harrisburg and came home.