

*Track and Field*

(Excerpt)

The night the prom was going on, I ran.

I could smell when somebody's lawn had just been watered. I could smell the cooling engine if someone's car had just been parked. I could see people's lives through their front windows—the color of their sofa, the kind of lamps they had, the pictures on their walls, if they were talking or sitting separately, reading books or watching TV. And they couldn't see me.

Running at night made me invisible.

Cars passed, so close I felt the heat of their motors. I'd worn a midnight blue singlet and matching shorts, all dark on purpose, without reflective gear, but my legs and arms lit up white in the glow of headlights, like a Polaroid taken with too much flash. I imagined the drivers startled, wondering what they'd glimpsed running past them.

To be completely invisible in the dark, I'd have had to be black. But I wasn't black. The girls on my track team called me Whitey.

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I wanted to be at the prom, and I wanted to be there with Hilton Jackson.

For weeks, the boys had been talking about who they were taking and the girls, about who they were going with. Whenever anybody asked Hilton, he'd say, in a teasing voice, "I'm taking Slim, or I ain't taking nobody."

Slim was Hilton's nickname for me. I liked to hear him say it.

*I'm taking Slim, or I ain't taking nobody.*

Those words folded themselves into my chest and Hilton slid me a look from under his eyelashes—I'd never seen a boy with pretty eyelashes before—while his lips opened in a slow, lazy smile.

Then Darnell or Demetrius Wilson—they were twins—would come back with, “You ain't taking no Slim to no prom, Nigga,” and somebody would laugh.

They were right—he hadn't taken me. Instead, I was running.

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My name isn't Whitey, or Slim. It's JoBeth, but Coach Carmichael called me by my last name, looking me in the eyes while he made a half-nod down with his chin, underlining the unmentionable but incredibly obvious connection between us: we were both white.

Last fall on our first away meet, he'd stood in the motel lobby, staring down at his clipboard, at the list of rooms and who was going in them, scratching at one of his sticky-out ears and frowning. He was probably hoping some other white girl in Nikes would run out from behind one of the ugly plaid chairs so he could put us together.

By the third away meet, I'd figured out he was rotating me through the list of names in alphabetical order, like I was a bad set of menstrual cramps: something you could put up with for a little while because you knew it wouldn't be back to bother you for at least a month.

In the motel parking lot in Murfreesboro, Coach Carmichael pretended to be fiddling with one of the rear tires, but he was waiting for me. “You know, Pritchett, you’re the first white girl on this team in five years.” He pushed at the tire, testing it with his thumb. I could tell there was nothing wrong with the tire. Coach’s ears were turning red along the edges.

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There was a streetlight at the corner of Russell Road and Highland. I turned left, skirting the circle of light. I was running my 8-mile loop past Campbell Lake, where the swans and ducks slept, heads tucked under their wings, floating like bath toys on the black sheet of water. This time I was lengthening the loop to include the high school, ten miles. I’d been drinking Gatorade all afternoon.

It was only May but the night air was close and warm like breath in your ear. Sweat trickled from my top lip to the corner of my mouth. I licked in the drops, spreading the taste of salt to the back of my tongue.

My mother said no about the prom. She didn’t say it was because Hilton was black, she just said tenth graders were too young for the prom. It would be “our turn soon enough.”

But that wasn’t the real reason. Lots of sophomores were going. One girl I knew was going with a guy who’d graduated last year and was still hanging around town. The prom committee said if he paid for his ticket, nobody could stop him coming, it was a free country.