

RUNNERS

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RUNNERS

John Fraser

*'.... we run because we like it
Through the broad bright land.'*

Charles Hamilton Sorley (1895–1915)
The Song of the Ungirt Runners



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1 Runners in Training

LOOKING AT pictures (escorted by armed men).
The wise athletic fish leaps, and topples down the fisherman. We move along. From the millstones, tiny warriors in blue armour spill out.

Someone nearby is playing ping-pong. There is perfect peace. I can see the plantations through the plate glass, too stuffed with sun they seem, the plants can't nod with no wind – but the filtered scent is lulling. Midsummer. Satyrs, druggy decadence, and peace – for this slice of time – is perfect.

The ping-pong's more insistent, and my counsellor, Shapur, says, 'Get the fuck down!' – we're all sprawl each other, a kind of terrified orgy – me and Shapur, the lady spy, Lili, and

Rick who will succeed me. A fine quintet, end of act one, all horizontal.

‘Some guy is popping at us’ – maybe the guy that’s grown those too green plants, the flowers already on the edge of rot. It’s someone else’s territory, or even faith, a state in travail. We’re pinned down, and then we hear the helicopter, and we think ‘we’re saved’, but no, it’s rattled off. It’s like those solitary wasplike things, so finicky about their nesting, just buzz around, out on house hunts.

When we’ve all settled down again, our situation’s bad. Wrong orders given, guys get killed – I only bought this job, I’m not elected, just got lucky with the cards. I’m the one responsible for all the guys that’s killed, but not responsible for being killed.

We scuttle out. Sara, the lady spy, has brought her hammered car, her Hummer, a military look, no windows and no armour. We all jump in, the pictures in the show have left us with their violence, not tranquillity – the fish, the mill.

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We're all scared stupid. Our paid friends, with guns, have left.

*

I hear, 'The dead ones climbed up to help the strangled ones.'

We're huddled here, but I stand up. I'm the politician, after all, although I'm not elected, not responsible. I wave my arms. There's a militiaman, aims high, down come some leaves, a fruit, a body arches up, and Shapur says, 'No one's gonna vote for you now', and in the trees we see them, dangling or supine, lying along the branches, like apples on a paradise tree or sleeping jaguars. The hanged ones dance the *pizzica*, a courtly dance, a-circling back to back in couples, each Jack with a Jill, resolute, and concentrating.

A big guy, fireman maybe, says 'Outathere', and now they pull me out, I'm being hawsered, face down and screaming, along the ground, my

pants is halfway off, more worrying than all the oil and roots and such – that head gouge feels quite deep – my friends are shouting ‘stop’, but everything is speeding up, we’ve lost slow-time, when life is fitted up in beige, no more cascades of blood and prick of cordite.

‘Why’d you winch him away?’ screams Lili. ‘He’s our big coin, gets us away from all these fucking indigenes,’ and I know she means the Indians, our Mayans. Or suchlike. She is our athlete, long white legs that scissor past her rivals, will go far and fast, though not as fast as me – I’m planing over rocks and half my face is gone. I hope it was the ugly half, and laugh.

*

Later, I say, ‘The massacre I stumbled on, indigenous guys?’

‘So-called,’ Shapur explains. ‘They’ve been shovelled over the border. . .

‘Well,’ I say, wisely, ‘we must all be

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indigenous somewhere.’

‘And they got cash, for being killed, and not ungrateful either.’

‘Got those little telephones that everybody uses?’

‘As usual, responsibilities elude us,’ Shapur concludes, ‘though yours seemed plain enough. We’ll have you take a holiday, then maybe have you win election, clear the slate. When there’s a plot, and tit for tat, the most important thing is that your tit should televise as tat.’

I’m innocent, though innocence in adults makes you look a fool.

*

‘Meanwhile,’ Shapur says, ‘we’ll think of your successors—’

‘I’ve only just arrived.’

‘Already there’s been a massacre, then they shoot at you. And Sara’s there on hand with

transport. You are perishable goods, my friend.'

'Who's in the frame?' I say grumpily.

He shows a photo. Lili. Long legs. 'Ran in the Olympics. Makes them very popular.'

'That's all she can do, just run? Some hunting, maybe, even gathering? And did she win?'

'No, maybe some other time. An also ran. And, speaking quite humanistically, she's unspent coin.' He looks me up and down. 'Running's important in this job.'

'We take on Lili, then,' I say, 'like that Greek girl that dropped her apple. And after? Her being the dessert?'

'I think some muscle. A beautiful boy, he's done TV, told all he thought to millions, and it wasn't much, but here he is.'

Rick. One of those limping heroes of the Greeks, somewhat a bully boy.

'Security is what they want,' Shapur says. 'People. Sit safely in the evenings.'

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‘Watching us,’ I say. ‘But how’s their security assured, assuming they’ve a place to sit?’

‘Security means breaking heads. And legs too, if you must. Even give brains a little tweak – channel dire thoughts away, access to information, that’s the thing.’

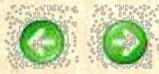
‘So, he’s the thug that specialises in chop and change?’ I say.

‘That is what security is all about, roughing people up, and he’s the man. You can’t rely on lady spies with little trucks to get you out of messes. Eternal peace, yes, that’s the goal.’

‘It’s perfect peace. That is the phrase, remember it.’

So, there’s the crown prince and the princess. Both beautiful, and satisfied, one with the other.

*



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