

one

*S*tep, breath. Step, breath.

My best friend, Serena, doesn't understand why I run. She said once that of all the different forms of working out, she thought running seemed like the absolute worst. The most punishing. Of course, Serena does yoga.

Step, breath. Step, breath.

As far as I'm concerned, nothing feels better than a run, especially on a morning like this. It's early; the fog is still hanging heavy over the bay. I have the town almost to myself – just me and the dog walkers and the deliverymen, all of us making our way through the thick morning air. It's almost May, but at this hour it's barely in the fifties. Perfect running weather. I alternate each step with an exhalation. My breath clouds the air in front of me and I race right through it.

Step, breath. Step, breath.

The funny thing about running is that everything hurts. Not just the obvious parts: calves and quads, ankles and glutes. No, my stomach hurts, every muscle straining to help me make the next step, especially when I'm going uphill, like I am now. My shoulders hurt, aching in the joints from which I swing my arms to propel myself forwards. I always do whatever I can to keep from focusing on the pain. When I was studying for my SATs, I used this time to test myself on vocabulary words. Before that, I listened to music as loud as I could, like I thought I could drown the pain out. Right now, I'm going over – moment for moment, word for word – the events of last night. When Chirag finally asked me to junior prom.

If I'm honest, maybe that's why I'm out here this morning instead of sleeping in like the rest of the world. Why should I sleep when it's so much more fun to be awake, thinking about what happened last night?

Step, breath. Step, breath.

It's not like I didn't think he was going to ask me. We've been going out since January; of *course* he was going to ask me. But I didn't know *how* he was going to ask me, and I certainly didn't think he was going to show up on my doorstep at nine o'clock on a Tuesday night with a dozen red roses and a sign that read: *Maisie Winters, I love you. Will you go to prom with me?*

We'd never said *I love you* before.

I didn't let him inside. I stepped out onto the porch, shut the door tight behind me, and opened my mouth to say *I love you too*. But the sound of my parents fighting, audible even through the closed door, stopped me.

We heard my father's shouts, loud and clear. Something about the dishes he'd left in the sink for days.

‘Why didn’t you just put them in the dishwasher if they bothered you so much?’

‘Because it’s not my *job* to clean up after you. And I wanted to see just how long you’d let them sit there before you realized you’d left a mess for me to clean up.’

‘So the dishes were some kind of test I didn’t know I was taking?’

‘Yes, a test you failed—’

I don’t think they even care what they’re fighting about any more. I think they just fight because they’ve forgotten that there’s any other way to communicate. But anyway, the sound of their shouts kind of put a damper on the whole love thing. So I didn’t say *I love you* back. Instead, I pushed Chirag down the front steps and toward his car in our driveway. I’d done this at least a dozen times before – dragged him away from our house during one of my parents’ many epic battles. Undoubtedly, Chirag knew why he was being pushed backwards so rapidly that we nearly fell down the front-porch stairs, but he was sensitive enough not to mention it. Instead he grinned, because with every step I repeated the word *Yes*. *Yes, yes, yes*, I’ll go to prom with you.

When he left, I worried that maybe I’d done the wrong thing. Maybe I should have said *I love you too* before he drove away. But then, he didn’t actually *say* he loved me, so maybe I wasn’t *supposed* to say it back. Maybe it doesn’t technically, officially *count* until it’s said out loud. Maybe there’s some strict etiquette about *I love yous* that I don’t know because it’s never happened to me before. Late last night, I actually considered putting it in a note of my own, just so that we’d be perfectly even.

Now I blink, brushing some sweat from my eyelids, and

picture his liquid brown eyes staring at me, crinkling at the edges as his lips widen into a smile. We're polar opposites, physically at least. I have red hair and blue eyes and pale skin dotted with too many freckles. He has caramel skin without a single blemish. To Chirag, my freckles are exotic. He once told me he thought they were sexy, like hundreds of tiny tattoos.

We're going out tonight. Maybe I'll say it then. If he says it first, then I'll definitely say it. I practise the words now, saying them aloud softly in between heaving breaths: *I love you too. I love you too. I love you too.* I break into a sprint, panting. Each word is an effort. This is the last hill before I'll turn back and start running home. I just have to make it around one more curve. Sweat trickles down my neck, beneath my ponytail, getting caught somewhere in my sweatshirt.

I found the dress I want to wear to prom in a magazine over a month ago. It's green and silky and practically backless. It even has a matching headpiece, the same shade of green, for me to pin my long hair around. It's expensive, but I think I can convince my mom. It's the least she can do after last night. Typical of my parents to ruin one of the most important moments of my life with their fighting. But I'll have to work up the nerve to wear the headpiece to the dance anyway. With my red hair, a green sort-of hat could look like I'm dressed up as a Christmas elf or a leprechaun or something. I showed Serena a picture of the dress the other night and she thought that I could totally pull it off, but I'm not convinced yet.

I turn around and start the trek home. This is the easiest part of my run: mostly downhill and with the promise of a hot shower and breakfast once I make it back. I don't notice the first few raindrops; they mix in with my sweat. But as the rain

increases, it becomes impossible to ignore. Serena would say that I should've looked at the forecast before I decided to run this morning. Serena wouldn't understand that I rolled out of bed hours before my alarm went off, got dressed in the dark, and jogged out the front door without even looking at myself in the mirror, let alone at a weather report.

I'm keeping this run short, just in case Chirag wants to run together after school later. When we run together, it always turns into a competition, a dozen tiny races along the way. Who can get to the end of this street faster? Who can make it up the hill first? Who can jump highest over the tree stump on my corner? I won't mind a second workout today. I never miss an excuse to spend more time with him – or anything at all that keeps me out of the house, and away from my parents' fighting, just a little bit longer.

Only a few blocks left; I can see the tree stump from here. It was an enormous oak once, but it was struck by lightning years ago. Its branches crashed through the windows of the nearest house; the trunk fell flat across the street and caused some kind of massive car accident. No one ever bothered getting rid of the stump, though. Apparently, its roots were so deep that digging it up would have been really expensive. They'd have had to cut off the plumbing to half the neighbourhood. At least that's what my father told me. Maybe he was just trying to scare me from going outside in a thunderstorm, like I am right now.

The rain turns icy cold, snaking its way under my sweatshirt and into my sneakers. I shiver. The first crack of thunder makes me jump. I break into a sprint; I can almost see our house from here. Anyway, I shouldn't be such a baby, scared of a little thunder and lightning. When I was younger, I'd crawl

into my parents' bed during thunderstorms, settle myself right in between them. I couldn't do that now if I wanted to. My father started sleeping in the den months ago.

Lightning streaks across the sky, breaking up the fog, drenching my neighbourhood in light. For a split second, everything is completely clear, as bright as if it were the middle of the day and not six in the morning. It takes me a second to realize that I've stopped running, that I'm standing still.

Another crack of lightning, closer now, and I spin around in the direction of the sound. Behind me, a tree has been hit, just a few yards away from the tree stump. Whoever said that lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place? A blackened branch hangs on to the tree's trunk by just a few fibres of wood, draped down over the electrical wires, or phone wires, or whatever they are, dancing in the wind, setting off sparks that look almost like fireworks.

I should get moving, go on home, take off these soaked clothes and sit on top of the radiator until I'm warm. But for some reason, I find myself rooted in this spot, staring at the embers flying down. It's strange to see sparks even as the rain grows stronger, stranger still when they ignite into flames. There is an audible *whoosh* as the fire travels up the branch of the tree, a crisp sort of crackling as the leaves begin to burn, filling the air with tiny pieces of white ash. I taste smoke in the back of my throat, so thick and heavy that I think I might retch.

I press my hands to my face when the branch finally snaps from the tree, dragging the wires to the ground with an enormous crash every bit as loud as the thunder.

Another flash of lightning illuminates the sky, but my neighbourhood is already saturated with light from the fire

and the sparks coming off the wires. When they hit the wet ground, they sizzle.

I close my eyes and listen: the sizzles sound almost like whispers.

Hiss, hiss, hisssssssssss.