

THE RUNNER

By Don DeLillo

The runner took the turn slowly, watching ducks collect near the footbridge where a girl was scattering bread. The path roughly followed the outline of the pond, meandering through stands of trees. The runner listened to his even breathing. He was young and knew he could go harder but didn't want to spoil the sense of easy effort in the dying light, all the day's voices and noises drained out in steady sweat.

Traffic skimmed past. The girl took bread in fragments from her father and pitched them over the rail, holding her hand open like someone signaling five. The runner eased across the bridge. There were two women thirty yards ahead, walking along a path that led out to the street. A pigeon quick-stepped across the grass when the runner approached, leaning into his turn. The sun was in the trees beyond the parkway.

He was a quarter of the way down the path at the west side of the pond when a car came off the road, bouncing onto the sloped lawn. A breeze stirred up and the runner lifted his arms out, feeling the air slip into his T-shirt. A man got out of the car, moving fast. The runner passed an old couple on a bench. They were putting together sections of the newspaper, getting ready to leave. Purple loosestrife was coming into bloom along the near bank. He thought he would do four more laps, close to the edge of his endurance. There was a disturbance back there, over his right shoulder, a jump to another level. He looked back as he ran, seeing the old couple rise from the bench, unaware, and then

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the car on the grass, out of place, and a woman standing on a blanket looking toward the car, her hands raised, framing her face. He turned forward and ran past the sign that said the park closes at sundown, although there were no gates, no effective way to keep people out. The closing was strictly in the mind.

The car was old and bruised, the right rear fender painted a rustproof copper, and he heard staccato bursts from the exhaust pipe when it drove off.

He rounded the south end, watching two boys on bikes to see if something in their faces might hint at what was happening. They went past him, one to either side, and music leaked from the headset one of them wore. He saw the girl and her father at the end of the footbridge. A line of brushed light passed across the water. He saw the woman on the slope turned the other way now, looking down the parkway, and there were three or four people looking in the same direction, others with dogs just walking. He saw cars streaming past in the northbound lanes.

The woman was a short broad figure stuck to the blanket. She turned to some people moving toward her and began to call to them, not understanding that they knew she was in distress. They were around the blanket now and the runner watched them gesture for calm. Her voice was harsh and thick, with the breathless stammer of damaged speech. He couldn't tell what she was saying.

At the foot of a mild rise the path was soft and moist. The father looked toward the slope, a hand extended in front of him, palm up, and the girl selected bits of bread and turned toward

the rail. Her face went tight in preparation. The runner approached the bridge. One of the men near the blanket came down to the path and jogged off toward the steps that led up to the street. He held his hand to his pocket to keep something from flying out. The girl wanted her father to watch her throw the bread.

Ten strides beyond the bridge the runner saw a woman coming toward him at an angle. She tilted her head in the hopeful way of a tourist who wishes to ask directions. He stopped but not completely, turning gradually so that they continued to face each other while he moved slowly backward on the path, legs still going in a runner's pump.

She said pleasantly, "Did you see what happened?"

"No. Just the car really. About two seconds."

"I saw the man."

"What happened?"

"I was leaving with my friend who lives just across the street here. We heard the car when it came over the curb. More or less bang on the grass. The father gets out and takes the little boy. No one had time to react. They get in the car and they're gone. I just said, 'Evelyn.' She went right off to telephone."

He was running in place now and she moved closer, a middle-aged woman with an inadvertent smile.

"I recognized you from the elevator," she said.

"How do you know it was his father?"

"It's all around us, isn't it? They have babies before they're ready. They don't know what they're getting into. It's one problem after another. Then they split up or the father gets in trouble with the police. Don't we see it all the time? He's unemployed, he uses drugs. One day he decides he's entitled to see more of his child. He wants to share custody. He broods for days. Then he comes around and they argue and he breaks up the furniture. The mother gets a court order. He has to stay away from the child."

They looked toward the slope, where the woman stood gesturing on the blanket. Another woman held some of her things, a sweater, a large cloth bag. A dog went bounding after seagulls down near the path and they lifted and settled again nearby.

"Look how heavy she is. We see more and more of this. Young women. They can't help it. It's a condition they're disposed to. How long are you in the building?"

"Four months."

"There are cases they walk in and start shooting. Common-law husbands. You can't separate a parent and expect everything works out. It's hard enough raising a child if you have the resources."

"But you can't be sure, can you?"

"I saw them both and I saw the child."

"Did she say anything?"

"She didn't have a chance. He grabbed the boy and got back in the car. I think she was totally frozen."

"Was anyone else in the car?"

"No. He dropped the boy on the seat and they were gone. I saw the whole thing. He wanted to share custody and the mother refused."

She was insistent, wincing in the light, and the runner remembered seeing her once in the laundry room, folding clothes with the same dazzled look.

"All right, we're looking at a woman in a terrible stricken state," he said. "But I don't see a common-law husband, I don't see a separation, and I don't see a court order."

"How old are you?" she said.

"Twenty-three."

"Then you don't know."

He was surprised by the sharpness in her voice. He ran in place, unprepared and dripping, feeling heat rise from his chest. A police car swung up over the curbstone and everyone at the blanket turned and looked. The woman came near collapse when the policeman got out of the car. He moved in a practiced amble toward the group. She seemed to want to drop, to sink into the blanket and disappear. A sound came out of her, a desolation, and everyone moved a little closer, hands extended.

The runner used the moment to break off the dialogue. He went back to his laps, trying to recover the rhyme of stride and respiration. A work train passed beyond the trees on the other side of the pond, grave horn braying. He made the wide turn at the south end, feeling uneasy. He saw the small girl trail her father along a narrow path that led to an exit. He saw a second police car on the grass far to his left. The group was breaking up. He crossed the bridge, trying to spot the woman he'd been talking to. Ducks sailed in wobbly lines to the scattered bread.

Two more laps and he could call it quits.

He ran faster, still working at a cadence. The first police car left with the woman. He saw that the far end was empty now, sliding into deep shade. He made the turn, knowing he'd been wrong to cut the conversation so abruptly, even if she'd spoken sharply to him. A traffic cone jutted from the shallows. The runner approached the bridge.

Several strides into the last lap he veered onto the slope, gradually slowing to a walk. A policeman leaned on the door of the cruiser, talking to the last witness, a man who stood with his back to the runner. Cars hurried past, some with headlights shining. The policeman

looked up from his notebook when the runner drew near.

"Sorry to interrupt, officer. I just wonder what the woman said. Was it her husband, someone she knew, who snatched the child?"

"What did you see?"

"Just the car. Blue with one discolored fender. Four-door. I didn't see the plates or notice the make. The slightest glimpse of the man, moving kind of crouched."

The policeman went back to his notes.

"It was a stranger," he said. "That's all she could tell us."

The other man, the witness, had half-turned, and now the three of them stood in a loose circle, uncomfortably caught, eyes not meeting. The runner felt he'd entered a rivalry of delicate dimensions. He nodded at no one in particular and went back to the path. He started running again, going in a kind of skelter, elbows beating. A cluster of gulls sat motionless on the water.

The runner approached the end of the run. He stopped and leaned over deeply, hands on hips. After a moment he started walking along the path. The police car was gone and tire marks cut across the grass, three sets of curves that left ridges of thick dirt. He went out to the street and walked across the overpass toward a row of lighted shops. He never should have challenged her, no matter how neat and unyielding her version was. She'd only wanted to protect them both. What would you rather believe, a father who comes to take his own child or someone lurching out of nowhere, out of dreaming space? He looked for her on the benches outside their building, where people often sat on warm evenings. She'd tried to extend the event in time, make it recognizable. Would you rather believe in a random shape, a man outside imagining? He saw her sitting under a dogwood tree in an area to the right of the entrance.

"I looked for you back there," he said.

"I can't get it out of my mind."

"I talked to a policeman."

"Because actually seeing it, I couldn't really

grasp. It was so farfetched. Seeing the child in that man's grip. I think it was more violent than guns. That poor woman watching it happen. How could she ever expect? I felt so weak and strange. I saw you coming along and I said I have to talk to someone. I know I just ranted."

"You were in complete control."

"I've been sitting here thinking there's no question about the elements. The car, the man, the mother, the child. Those are the parts. But how do the parts fit together? Because now that I've had some time to think, there's no explanation. A hole opened up in the air. That's how much sense it makes. There isn't a chance in a thousand I'll sleep tonight. It was all too awful, too enormous."

"She identified the man. It was definitely the



father. She gave the police all the details. You had it just about totally right."

She looked at him carefully. He had a sudden sense of himself, rank and panting, cartoonish in orange shorts and a torn and faded top, and he felt a separation from the scene, as if he were watching from a place of concealment. She wore that odd pained smile. He backed up slightly, then leaned to shake her hand. This was how they said good night.

He went into the white lobby. The echo of the run hummed in his body. He stood waiting in a haze of weariness and thirst. The elevator arrived and the door slid open. He rode up alone through the heart of the building. ■