



## THE DISTANCE

BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

**C**oach calls me over after the half-mile relay. Head between my legs, heart still on fire, trying hard to catch even a tiny breath. I'll take that—a tiny breath. Just a little airflow back into my lungs. Just enough to stop the burning. Maybe a little bit more could make its way down to my legs, keep them from trembling.

Laurence jogs up to me with some of the other guys. "You blew the third leg, Cash," he says. "Your race sucked a big one."

Even with my hard breathing and bent-overness, I just give him a look and he steps off. A little.

"He's gonna make you do it again. The 800's your new race, man. Might as well get up and start breathing."

"That's the last time I'm running it. Ever," I say. All of them look blurry and far away. I see the fourth leg, Jason, looking down on me like he can't believe I'm human. Like he's wondering why I'm even alive.

"I could have caught them if you would've kicked a little," Jason says. "You rigged instead of kicking. You, like, just stopped. Who just stops like that?"

"I didn't stop!" But the words come too quick, and it hurts my chest to shoot them out like that.

"It's Penn Relays, Cash! You just blew up Penn Relays. You just blew it for all of us."

"We suck anyway," I say. But the words come out weak and broken up. *I hate relays*, I want to say. *They suck*. But that would make me not a *team person*. That would mean I sucked for even thinking it. Then all of them are jogging off again, warming up for their other races.

In the race that got us here, I ran relaxed and easy—like Coach said to. Didn't break two minutes but Coach said it was a good beginning. The others hustled and we got our qualifying time. "When we get there," Coach had said to me, "you're gonna run it different. Harder. Faster. You're made for the half mile. Want it. Just want it."

I don't. This kinda pain isn't something anybody could want.

"Cashew!" Coach calls again.

I put up my hand, trying to show him I'm half dead, can't answer, can't even say for the hundredth millionth time *That's not my name*.

It's Cashay. Calvin James "CJ" *Cashay*. It's actually Cashay-Brunner, but by the time I hit fifth grade, the Brunner and the CJ were gone, and I was just Cashay. By the time I started running, Cashay was gone, too.

I take another deep breath, try to stand. But my side is on fire, so I grab it and bend over again. There's the urban legend about the kid who drank soda, ate some kind of crackling, popping candy, then ran a race and died at the finish line but not before he ran the fastest race of his life, leaving everybody else in the dust.

"What happened to you, Cashay? How'd you get beat down like that? How'd you lose so . . . so *badly*? That's not you."

Coach is above me now, so close he doesn't even have to raise his voice to talk to me. So he doesn't—he's whispering.

"I'm just curious. Truly, truly curious."

*I didn't drink the soda and eat the popping candy*, I want to say. *So now I'm just dying*.

I close my mouth and try to get some air in through my nose. I'm staring at his legs: brown and still real muscular.

He's wearing blue-and-gray running shorts—school colors—and his legs go on and on. He ran the last leg on the quarter-mile relay in college a million years ago *and* quarter-mile hurdles, Olympic trials—close enough to *almost* taste Atlanta in 1996—everything. He's still the real deal and tries not to let the team forget that.

"I don't like relays," I manage to get out—mostly wind but some words too. "I told you I couldn't do it!"

"You told me you didn't want to do it. Not that you couldn't. You died because you didn't want to. You just stopped. It looked like something slammed into you—"

"I hit a wall!"

"You stopped. Your brain. Your mind. Your body. Just stopped."

"Aren't coaches . . . supposed . . . to say stuff like . . ." I take another deep breath, enough air to get some more words out. "Like . . . you did . . . your best? I'm proud of you. . . . Good race."

"It wasn't a good race, and I'm not proud of you. You're confusing me with a parent. They have to say that kind of crap. You looked really jacked up at the 600. At the 7, you looked like— You looked really bad, man. You just looked *bad*, Cashew. . . ."

After another moment, I try to stand up straight, hold

on to my back with my hands, and take more deep breaths as I start walking slow around the outside of the track. Coach follows me, then pulls my arm and starts jogging real slow just a little bit ahead. I shake my arm free and try to keep up with him. The last thing I want is for people to see Coach holding me up.

"I got this," I tell him.

"Not bad ugly—that's not what I'm saying," Coach continues, still real quietly. "Bad like you could care less. That kinda bad. I could see it on your face from across the field."

I don't say anything, just keep jogging beside him.

"Your legs are a mile long. You don't have one single ounce of extra weight anywhere. . . ."

Air is finally making its way to my lungs again. But I keep my head and arms down as I run—*lopey like a fawn*, Coach says. *Real relaxed. That's good.* We jog for about a hundred yards without saying anything. Then he starts again. "How did you manage to get lapped in an 800, Cashew? You have to be running backward to get lapped in that race."

"Rigged." I take another deep breath. "The wall hit me. That back straightaway's got a wind to it. And that guy from Packer's on steroids. Look at him. No other sixth grader's got a beard. He looks like he's fifty, no offense."

"I'm thirty-three, and he DESTROYED you!"

"I don't like relays, okay!" I stop jogging and look right at him. "I'm an only child, remember? I'm used to doing things alone."

"You stop being an only child when you step onto the track on *my* team, Cash. Your *only* ended there."

"I like running just my races—"

"Your races are everybody's races. You know how this works. Points are points. Relay points. Individual points. It all adds up. So don't give me that 'my own race' junk. None of these races belong to you." He starts jogging again, and I do too. Not because I feel like jogging next to him. I just don't want to look stupid on the field. Again.

Coach isn't mean. Not even a little bit. His command of the English language just kinda sucks when he's mad. Even if he was born here in New York. And his parents too. And their parents, he told us. He said, "Bootstrap American to the bone." Then he gave us this real long look. "It means something," he said. "To work your butt off and try to *do* something. Try to *change* something."

"This race sucks," I say to him, trying to shake that lecture from my head. Maybe it was a month ago, but it's the one that keeps crawling back to haunt me. *Try to change something.*

"I don't even know why you put me in it, Coach. It's not for humans. I'm a quarter-miler."

"And in the open races, you run an amazing quarter mile. In the open races, you fly. But not on the relays. We both know, on the quarter-mile relay, we got four guys who bust up your time. That's why I thought I'd give you a chance in the 800."

"We made the qualifying time," I say real slow. "We got here."

I see something move across Coach's face. Like a sadness and a rage all at once. Then, real quick, it's gone. He shakes his head like he's trying to shake whatever's in it out again.

"Yeah, Cash. We qualified. We got here. We ran Penn Relays. Maybe that's enough for you." He looks at me. "Maybe for you, that's always going to be okay."

He keeps looking at me like he's waiting for me to answer.

"I did everything you said, Coach: relaxed on the curve, tried to get some speed on that back straightaway—everything."

The stadium is packed. At the 300, there's a photographer taking every runner's picture just before they cross the finish line. Me and Coach jog past the javelin throwers, and I try to lift my shoulders a little. Buff up. Any one of

them could be two of me. Probably steroids. The whole world looks like it's on steroids. The whole world is shorter and stronger than me. My moms both swear that one day I'm gonna love every bit about the way I look. Both of them have that strange ability to lie without twitching or blinking or looking away.

Me and Coach are almost done with our second lap around when he says, real quiet, "You did, Cashew. You did everything I said. But you didn't push yourself. You didn't run like running was all you had. Just for the two minutes it takes to run that race. Inside that race, running is everything. Running is all there is. And after you win, the world comes back—and it's different." Coach stops talking and looks at me. "There's not a thing about you that says you can't blow everyone on this track away, Cashew. But for some reason, you're deciding to be regular. . . . You don't have to be regular."

"It's *their* race, Coach! It's not mine. Let them *win* it. I'm not giving them this, too. Let them get some bootstraps!"

Coach looks at me again. He almost smiles, but he doesn't. Instead he kicks out his leg and starts sprinting, fast. I lean forward and start running hard to keep up with him. We do a hundred-yard dash, then jog a few steps and break into another one, me right at Coach's heels even

though he's running full-out. Maybe people are watching. People tell us we run alike: all leg, upper body loose, hands open. But at the end of our sprints, Coach isn't even breathing hard. My chest is on fire.

"Just like that," Coach says. "They'll keep on running long after you've stopped. Whether you win the damn race or not, Cash. You disappear. They go off and shine. And you won't be able to blame them, cuz you made the choice to fade away. You're better than that. You're faster and smarter than that."

Then he drops me with the rest of the team and the assistant coaches in the warm-up area. Some of the guys are stretching. Others are doing practice dashes, running out fifty yards, then jogging back. Nobody says anything to me, and I sit off to the side, start stretching my hamstrings that are already crazy-tight.

The day Coach gave us that bootstraps lecture, Laurence was the only one to say something back to him.

"I don't need straps, Coach," Laurence said. "I'm golden. Don't need to change anything. You never heard of a silver spoon? My dads said if I never want to work—ever—then I don't have to." Laurence looked around at all of us. "Don't even have to shine my spoon!" Some kids laughed. I wasn't

one of them. "And I'm not planning on working, cuz working sucks! Getting up early . . ."

A bunch of guys agreed with him. I kept my mouth closed. We were in the locker room, and it was hot and wet smelling. Smelled like armpits and all those funky body parts that explode with stink the minute a piece of clothing is removed from them.

"Then why're you running, Laurence?" Coach asked.

"To get girls. You know how we do." He dapped a couple of the guys, nodding and smiling. But there was a look on his face. Something deep. Something trying to hide.

Coach stopped talking then. Just shook his head. Told us to get dressed, that we were done for the day.

When I got outside that day, it was cold. Sneak-up, late-October cold. Ma was parked out front, the music turned up loud inside the car. Some old guy—Dan Fogelberg or Barry White, I don't remember. They all sounded alike to me: sad and sorry over something they lost—horses, women, card games, stuff like that. I could think of a million things to write songs about besides horses and women and card games.

"Am I going to have to work, Ma? Or is there some silver spoon waiting for me somewhere? Like Laurence has?"

Ma turned the music down and looked at me. Our car

was old. There were some cracks in the leather seats, and the carpet on the floor of it was worn away in some places. Since I was a baby, we'd lived in the same place: a small apartment on the top floor of a brownstone. We owned the apartment, and Moms was always calling it "your inheritance." I stared out the car window, waiting for Ma to answer.

"Your mom and I are always gonna make sure you have what you need, CJ. But, yeah, you'll work . . . of course you'll work."

"But a lot of kids at my school don't have to. . . ."

"And a lot will have to. And that's the great thing and the messed-up thing about living in the USA." Ma smiled at me. Maybe she was trying to make a joke, but I didn't get it. All I was getting was the way things were kinda jacked up in the world. I'd be working my butt off, and Laurence would be sitting in a comfy chair playing games on his phone.

"Doesn't suck if you love what you do, CJ," Ma said. She ran her hand over my head, then turned on the car and started driving.

"It sucks if you have to do it, though."

Ma took a deep breath. She looked like she was about to say something but then she didn't. I leaned my head

against the cold window and didn't say anything else for the ride home, thinking the whole way, *It sucks to be me.*

Laurence and the rest of the quarter-mile relay team are getting ready to run. Laurence is bent over, his ankles crossed, his fingertips touching the ground. I should be doing the same thing: stretching out my hamstrings some more.

"Can't believe you let a Packy lap you like that, bro. Two steps with those long legs, and you're around the track."

"Can't believe you blew up our team like that," the second-leg guy says. He hands Laurence the baton and Laurence gets behind him, and the third and fourth legs line up in front so that it goes first leg to fourth leg—back to front. They stand, bent forward now, only a little distance between them, and start running in place.

"Stick!" Laurence says, and the second-leg guy reaches his hand back so that Laurence can slap the baton into it. They go through the line doing this a few times, their motions fluid as water—like they've been doing this all their lives. Like it's natural as breathing.

"He didn't lap me. What was my split?"

"You don't want to know your splits, trust me." Laurence says between passes.

"It's a stupid race," I say. "I don't know why he even put

me in it. It's not for human beings. It's for people on steroids like that Packy dude."

A whole bunch of Packer guys are still jumping all over the steroids guy. He's grinning wide and scratching his beard.

Laurence and the others finish their practice and go back to stretching.

"The truth is, you got lapped because you ran it like a quarter mile. That's why you died at the 600. Your first split was 57." Laurence doesn't even look up from his stretch. He's in eighth grade, and for some reason, he's always all coolness. Like he's got everything covered forever and ever, amen.

"I ran a 57 quarter? That's my best time! That's like world-record material right there—" The air and strength is all back in me now, and I do some happy-dancing, not caring who's watching.

"Your second split was a sweet 1:37. Which means you ran your second quarter at 97, which might break this meet's record for the slowest quarter mile ever run."

I stop dancing real fast. 1:37 isn't good. It's old person with a cane, one leg, and a swollen foot time.

"That's what killed us Second Leg—Joseph—says. That's what buried us."

"It's not two quarter miles." Laurence unfolds himself



and finally looks at me. He's not as tall as me, but he's got muscles already. He's wearing a headband, cuz otherwise his hair would be in his eyes. The band is school colors, and anybody else might get all kinds of words thrown at them for wearing it.

"When you run it again, remember that."

The first call for their race comes, and the four of them jog over. Me and Laurence have the two-mom thing in common, but that's about where it ends. Laurence has two dads too. And all his parents live in the same building together. To top it all off, he's the only child. He can keep his silver spoon, because having all those people in my car all the time would make me crazy.

The first legs of the relay are down in the starts, fixing their fingers, getting their butts in the air. Ready. Laurence is on the inside, his favorite spot. The caller yells, "Set!" and the runners lift their butts higher. Then the gun goes off, and they all start running. Laurence taking a fast start and getting about twenty yards ahead of everybody else. He's smiling. I jog slow around the outside of the track, watching them. Laurence slows down a little. I can hear the coach yelling for him to get his arms up. A tall kid from St. Ann's gets close to him, and Laurence sprints out farther. The crowd is cheering. By the 200 mark, Laurence

is ahead of everyone. I've never seen him run with this kind of distance.

Both my moms are in the stands. Behind them, all four of Laurence's parents are standing up and cheering. Mama is sneak-emailing. I can tell, because her head is down and she has her reading glasses on. Moms is smiling and waving at me. Who knows how long she's been trying to get my attention. I give a quick wave and start pulling my sweats on.

Laurence is still way out ahead of everyone—his face dark, his arms flashing. He's kicked into something new, something fast and strong. Something crazily determined. I looked up at the stands again. His parents are losing it. They only see their son killing the others. They only see him winning. But I see something else. Standing there, my pants half on, my mouth maybe hanging open, I see that Laurence is already running fast toward the second leg and fast away from them. Fast and far away from them. I see him going and going and know right then that he'll keep running until he can't run anymore, until he can look behind himself and not see all that love, all that screaming and attention. Not see all those silver spoons getting shoved down his throat. He passes the stick to Joseph with so much distance between him and the second-place team that even Coach is stunned and smiling.



Ma looks up from her email, blows me a kiss. Moms shrugs—a “next time you’ll do better” shrug. A “no worries, there’ll be another chance” shrug. I smile, nodding. Knowing I will. The desire to run is different is already building. The chance to work crazy-hard at not being regular, at not disappearing. Behind my parents, Laurence’s people are cheering.

I see Coach give Laurence the thumbs-up. I see Laurence throw his fist in the air. I feel the hard “Yeah!” he’s screaming blowing toward me. I want to say, “Keep on running, Laurence. You got this.”

But instead I just watch him—thinking about next week’s 800. I’m gonna run it harder next week. Different. Better.

And maybe after next week, I’ll run it for years and years. Hard and fast and way beyond regular. Like I’m running *to* something . . . like the running’s all I have.

Coach looks over at me, looks hard like he’s trying to figure me out, like he can already see the amazing runner I’m gonna be, the records I’m gonna break, the trophies and medals and money . . . Olympic trials and beyond . . .

“Why are you standing there with your mouth hanging open, Cashew?! Move the body! Move. The. Body!! Jeez!”  
Or maybe not.

