

RUNNING GIRL



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Dirty weather blew into the city. It crashed against the towering glass office blocks in the west and pelted the spires, domes, and grand facades of the historic center. It spread north across hospitals and schools, and south across clubs and casinos. Darkening and accelerating, it raced east across the sewage works, the industrial park, and the car plant. And at last it fell on the Five Mile estate, blackening cracked asphalt, flooding blocked drains, and beating against the windows of Flat 12 Eastwick Gardens, where sixteen-year-old Garvie Smith lay on his bed, hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling.

He was a slender boy with a beautiful face, wearing slouch skinny jeans, a plain hoodie, and muddy high-tops. He had been lying there, in exactly the same position, for two hours. Staring.

His mother appeared in the doorway. She was a solid lady from Barbados with a broad face and clipped black hair misting over with gray. In her hand was an official-looking letter, which she folded away in her coat pocket as she glared at her son. She opened her mouth. Sixteen years of being a single parent had not only thickened and toughened her, but given her voice startling power.

“Garvie!”

He showed no sign of having heard.

“Garvie!”

“I’m busy,” he said at last, to the ceiling.

“Don’t mess with me, Garvie. Why aren’t you studying?”

“I am studying.”

There was a pause while his mother turned her attention to his room and its contents; not just the tumult of dirty laundry, piles of equipment, and overflow of general rubbish, but also—and in particular—the little table reserved for studying, unused for months and heaped with everything but books.

“Studying what exactly?”

There was an even longer pause while Garvie thought about this. “Complex numbers,” he said at last.

His mother began to take deep breaths. He could hear her.

Without taking his eyes off the ceiling, he said, “Say my study guide is unit a —”

“Garvie!” Her voice was a low growl.

“And my studying is unit bi —”

“Garvie, I’m warning you!”

“Then my *studying* is the complex number $a+bi$, where i has the property $i^2=1$.” He paused. “It’s what they call an unresolvable equation.”

“Garvie!”

He was silent.

“Are you smoking that stuff again?”

He didn't reply and didn't change his position, and his mother stared intently at his impassive face. He could hear her staring.

She was about to tell him he was a complete mystery to her.

"You're a complete mystery to me," she said.

She was going to say she didn't know who he was anymore.

"Garvie Smith?" she said. "I don't know who you are."

He heard her draw an especially deep breath. She was about to run through her usual list. It was a long list and needed a lot of breath.

With a minimum of elaboration and maximum force, she listed several relevant things. That Garvie's room was a box filled with junk. That proper studying is done sitting at a table with books and a computer (switched on). That Garvie Smith was the laziest boy in Five Mile, the laziest boy she'd ever heard of anywhere, perhaps the laziest boy in all history—not to mention rude and inconsiderate and *difficult*. That he was getting himself into worse and worse trouble every which way—and don't think she didn't know all about it. And that his exams, less than two months away, were absolutely his last chance to redeem himself.

He didn't respond.

"I'm warning you, Garvie," she said. "You shift yourself. Shift yourself right now. Get off your bed, get your books out of your bag, and turn on your computer."

She was on her way out to the hospital, where, as deputy nurse manager in the surgery unit, she often worked irregular hours. The letter which she had come in to discuss was now forgotten. She glared fiercely at her son one last time before withdrawing. "When I get

back,” she said, “I want to see this room completely tidy and a neat pile of work all done. I mean it, Garvie. You don’t go out, understand? You’re grounded till that studying’s done.”

Snorting, she left him, and a moment later there was the bang of the flat door slamming shut behind her.

Her son the mystery carried on staring at the ceiling. There were a couple of things his mother had forgotten to say and he said them to himself now. That he was a boy whose alleged “genius” level of IQ had never helped him achieve a single A in any subject in five years of secondary schooling. (“Not one, Garvie!”) That he was a boy from a good home who was getting into trouble—and not just for missing schoolwork or an untidy bedroom or general laziness, but for truancy, drinking, and (“Don’t you deny it, Garvie!”) for smoking *that stuff*.

He carried on staring at the ceiling. The rain carried on beating against the window.

What *was* genius? Watching difficult numbers fall into place? Remembering what other people didn’t or seeing what they missed? Yeah, well. What did numbers *do*? What happened that was worth remembering? What did he see that made him doubt for a second that life in general wasn’t some slow-motion, meaningless, crappy, *boring* little ball of cheap carpet fluff?

Therefore he carried on staring at the ceiling, fully clothed, muddy high-tops on, his face completely still. An unusual face with his jet-black hair, coppery complexion, bright blue eyes; a double take

sort of face, the result of his mixed-race ancestry. But a face completely blank with boredom.

An hour passed. Rain crackled against the window; cars hissed by on the highway. Another hour passed.

Then something else hit the window.

With a yawn, Garvie pulled himself off the bed and went over to look out. Standing hunched on the patch of grass below, a sharp-faced boy with thin wrists raised a hand. Felix. Felix the Cat. He was one of Garvie's friends that his mother classed as "trouble."

"Is your mum in?"

"No."

"Coming out for a smoke?"

"All right."

Garvie put on his old flaky-leather jacket and went out of the flat and down the stairs. It was nearly dark outside. The rain had temporarily stopped and the wet front of Eastwick Gardens shone black and yellow under the lamplight. Behind the block of flats was the highway, quieter now, and the looming black silhouette of the car plant, and behind that farm fields and scrubland. The other way was the estate—a maze of roads and streets, of pebble-dash connected houses and maisonettes, garages and corner shops, wire fences, grass strips and cracked curbs, all ordinary, familiar, and dull.

A cab came past and honked its horn, and Garvie lifted a hand to the driver, Abdul, a friend of his mother. Then he joined Felix and

they set off down the road together, jackets zipped up against the damp evening chill, ambling along the line of parked vans, past the electrical suppliers and betting shop, toward Old Ditch Road, where the kiddies' playground was.

Felix glanced about him continually as he walked, as if on the lookout for unexpected opportunities. He had a long white face flecked with pimples, and big black eyes. He was light on his feet, like a dancer. Garvie kept pace with him, head down, strolling along with his usual loose stride.

After a while he said, "Another Friday night in paradise."

Felix looked sideways at him, snuffed, and wiped his sharp nose. Then they went on in silence until they reached the playground.

There were a few others there already, hunched on the too-small swings and tiny merry-go-round. Ordinary boys with hoodies and wet hair and a dislike of being bored. They slapped hands and looked about them and settled back down.

"What's the plan?" Garvie said.

There was a general shrug.

Smudge suggested going down the pub. "Or what about that new bar in town? Rat Cellar, innit?" Felix knew the bouncer there, but not in a good way. Dani mentioned the casino, Imperium. But they'd have to collect a few fake members' cards and get toggged up, and the whole thing seemed like too much of an effort. Anyway, none of them had any money. In the end they sat there in silence.

"All right," Garvie said. "What've you got?"

They pooled tobacco and papers. Tiger had a half pint bottle of Glen's cheapest, two-thirds empty, Dani had a couple of cans of Red Stripe, and Smudge had a bag of sherbet lemons. They passed everything around. Felix had been to see Alex earlier and he rolled a small one and sent that round too.

They had some jokes. Tiger and Dani played chicken with an old sheath knife Tiger had found at the back of Jamal's, and Smudge fell off his swing and gave himself a nosebleed. Garvie sat apart, gazing in silence over the nearby rooftops toward the distant lights of the tower blocks downtown, blurry in the murky phosphorescence that lay above the city. He'd grown up here, had known it all his life, and knew beyond all reasonable doubt that it was an utter bore. Town was a bore, with its shops and stores, City Hall, and pedestrian precincts. The old quarter of cafés and restaurants was a bore. The new business district was a bore. The malls and superstores that sprawled along the highway were bores. And the Five Mile estate was the biggest bore of all. Sighing, he began to roll a big one.

"Hey, Sherlock," Smudge said. "Got a mystery for you. Off one of them puzzle sites."

Garvie looked across to where Smudge sat grinning. Nature had not been kind to Smudge. He had the face of a middle-aged butcher and the expressions of a ten-year-old child. He sat squashed into a seat on the merry-go-round, his pale, round face glistening with rain-wet, his little mud-colored eyes gazing at Garvie eagerly. Garvie shook his head. He took out cigarette papers, selected four, and began to stick them together.

“Busy,” he said at last.

“It’s a good one. Serious.”

“What’s the point, Smudge? The motive’s always the same.”

“Like what?”

“Sex or money.”

“Two things I don’t have a problem with, personally. Come on. Bet you a big one you can’t solve it.”

The boy rubbed the bristles of his big cropped head with sudden concentration, sighed with satisfaction, and resumed grinning. Garvie ignored him. He sprinkled in the stuff and licked the edges of the vast patchwork of papers.

Smudge began anyway.

“On the first of June, Lola Soul Diva’s found facedown on the floor of her luxury apartment. She’s been stabbed from behind.” He paused and thought for a moment. “Right in the spleen,” he said with satisfaction.

Garvie rolled, pinching at the sides.

Smudge went on. “There’s no sign of a struggle except the index finger of her left hand, busted where she fell forward. No bruising anywhere else, clothes not ripped, glasses still on her nose not smashed, watch still on her wrist—her *right* wrist—not smashed.”

He grinned slyly. “Good, innit?”

“No,” Garvie said with a sigh. “It’s crap. Like life itself, my friend.” With his teeth he twisted loose bits off the ends of the monstrous breezer, examined it for a moment, and casually tossed it up into the corner of his mouth.

Smudge went on: “In her right hand she’s holding a pen. Lying next to her is her private diary. On the page for that day she’d written *Told Big Up I don’t love him no more*. At the top of the page, next to the date, she’s written in this shaky writing 6ZB. Got it? 6ZB. Next to her diary is a ripped-up photograph of her husband.”

He grinned again. “Good, innit?”

“No,” Garvie said. “It’s a bore. Sex or money. Sex *and* money.” He flicked a match alight with his thumbnail and ignited the breezer.

Smudge continued doggedly. “Three men admit to visiting her that day. Her husband, who’s this pro poker player with a bad limp called Dandy Randy Wilder. Her manager, Jude Fitch Abercrombie, a hard suit with his left arm in a sling. And her boyfriend, this half-blind wild man called Big Up Mother. All of them give the police good explanations for their visits.”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “It’s brilliant, this, innit?”

“Utter twaddle,” Garvie said, taking a long drag on the breezer and turning his eyes upward.

“All right then, Sherlock. Work it out. Who did it?”

Garvie exhaled and passed the breezer to Felix. “No one did it,” he said.

“Come on, champ, you can do better than that.”

Garvie sat silently in a cloud of smoke, gazing across the darkened field beyond the playground.

“You got to think of what she wrote,” Smudge said. “Especially”—he paused dramatically—“6ZB.”

“Nonsense.”

“And while you’re at it,” Smudge went on, “give some thought to that undamaged watch. On her *right* wrist.”

The breezer went round and came back to Garvie, and he took a long drag, and then another.

“You know,” Smudge said, “I’m actually gutted. Thought you were good at this sort of thing. You smoke too much of that stuff, probably. Softens the brain. Do you want me to tell you what happened?”

“No one did it.”

Smudge tutted. “All right. If you can’t guess I’ll have to tell you. Her manager did it.”

Garvie blew out smoke. “No, he didn’t.”

“Did, actually, Sherlock. Shall I tell you how I know?”

Sitting there in his cloud of smoke, Garvie said in a bored voice, “She’s wearing a watch on her right wrist, so she’s probably left-handed. But she wrote 6ZB with her right hand because of her broken finger so her writing was shaky. So it’s not 6ZB at all. It’s 628. And if you match those numbers to the months of the year in her diary—June, February, August—and look at the initial letters, you get JFA: Jude Fitch Abercrombie. Her manager.”

“Oh.” Smudge looked puzzled. “There you are, then. The manager did it.”

“The manager didn’t do it because the murderer stabbed her from behind through the spleen.”

“So?”

“The spleen’s on the left, Smudge. Only a left-handed person would do that. And the manager had his left arm in a sling.”

Smudge opened his mouth and shut it again, and his whole face sagged a little. “Shit,” he said at last. “I must have told it wrong.”

Garvie leaned over and patted him on the arm. “Don’t worry about it, Smudgy. Life’s like that.”

They sat on the merry-go-round, knees tucked up to their chests, hoods pulled over the heads. The breezer went round three times more, shrinking to a speck of fire and vanishing at last after stinging everyone’s lips. Glen’s cheapest had gone a long time earlier. They finished the Red Stripe, and Smudge ate the last of the sherbet lemons, and they even ran out of cigarettes. The rain came on again, gently at first, and at last the conversation died. In the wet of the darkness they sat there listening to the noises of rain and the occasional passing car.

“Oh God,” Garvie said. “If something doesn’t happen soon I think I’m going to lose control.”

Smudge looked interested. “What do you mean by “soon?””

“Now, or in the next few minutes.”

And at that moment a siren went off next to them, so brutal and sudden it threw them into the air like rag dolls. Mouths open, hearts pounding, they just had time to see two police cars scream to a halt at the park gates—lights buzzing, doors flying open, policemen leaping into the road—before scattering randomly across the muddy grass toward the darkness.