

Cross Country

The girls' cross-country team practiced every school day. So did the boys, but in different directions. This was a wise decision for two reasons. First, the boys showed off, like peacocks fanning feathers. Second, mixing genders slowed down the male runners.

Seventeen-year-old Josie loved to run cross-country. During one practice, a bull tagged her last mile, catching her with a ferocious charge leveling directly into her rear end, propelling her ten feet flying, she came close to swearing off cross-country. But not hamburger. She reckoned that bull would cross her plate one day.

Josie's rear was sorely bruised. Only her mother, her primary care physician, and a few close friends ever saw her purple rear. It was, she said, fierce. She slept on her stomach for nearly a month.

Josie's story.



Josie did not know senior William Butler well, but admired his speed and stamina as a runner. Bill was tall, thin, long legs shouldering a mop of wavy brown hair that he kept tied when he ran, but not during the school day. So while Bill pegged six two, Josie stretched for five eight. She kept her shoulder-length blond hair pulled and tied off, but only because the hair heated her neck. Like Bill, like all runners, Josie was thin. It was not so much that she was absorbed in her mesomorphic form, or gave it any thought. For good time crossing the finish line after a 5 k run, the less weight the better. Besides, unlike many kids—or adults—eating was not a major source of joy. Her endomorphic spike when she ran, that so-called runner's high. The brain kicked in for that final sprint. That last mile, on the flat plain of a field, marked by tape or small orange cones, alerted all runners.

She started running in her early teens. Nothing to run from or to run toward, just the joy of moving. Her parents encouraged exercise, and her mother walked the three-mile country road skirting their home. Her father, a carpenter, worked. He thought the exercise would temper Josie's exuberance. She fidgeted, stirred frequently, or as he put it, "jittered and teetered."

Her father estimated the distance across the fields surrounding their house. Just estimates. He tied yellow tape to a fence post or tree, and did this for the five miles, eventually looping back to the beginning. If she started at one mile, she walked back that mile so to run one, walk one. It would take her fifteen minutes at a good jogger's pace until within a few months, she ran the entire five miles, or roughly three kilometers. Cross-country as a sport started in England. Reasons existed.

Cross-country is a poor man's sport. Shoes are useful, not required. As a team, teams won when the average speed for each team said as much. Every track had its own challenges. Some crossed streams, some climbed hills to allow the ease of the return with gravity. The track could take the harriers through woods, and through all kinds of weather.

Cross-country is a mindless sport. No math required. A harrier tunes into body rhythms,

paces the breathing—deep and easily. It is the habit of pace that frames the runner. Breath. Aware. Mindful of the ground. Looking to the path ahead. Aware of other harriers to the left or right.

Her high school had a cross-country girls' and boys' program only because a faculty member wanted it. Open to 9th graders, the kids fell into three groups. Serious athletes who were not interested in the clutter and expense of traditional sports. Kids who wanted flags in their yearbook credits. Kids whose parents thought it would be good for the porky child to exercise, and how better than peer pressure?

Setting aside the athletes, the yearbook kids did not last the year. The chubby kids could not get a hundred yards without complaining about ankles, muscle cramps, lost shoes, so on. The athletes might be interested in other sports as well and saw running as an extension of fitness. For Josie, she ran to run. Harking back to her field track as a young woman, running defined her. She thought about the next run while she finished the current. But it was always five miles, much further than the five-kilometer official runs. This worked for her. By mile three, she was charged for that final few hundred yards.

Seeing Bill on the fields, she assessed his form. She wondered if he followed her training schedule. Boys built muscle mass easily. That testosterone-thing. The genetic code of man beast, primate and primal. She entertained romance as an afterthought, only to the extent: *Is he dating anyone?* Josie did not fantasize, concoct physical scenarios involving her and Bill; she did not work on lame excuses to be near him.

Bill did. At a practice session in late October, Josie did her warm-up stretches. He approached. "You are a great runner."

She continued leaning into the hamstring stretches, "Thanks. You too."

"What's your time on this field?"

She paused, stood to look at him. He wore the jersey and shorts uniform they all wore, blue on blue with the school's name on the back. "On this track, about 16 minutes. But it's level. Just cows."

He laughed. "Yeah, cow shit is the worst obstacle. I can run the pattern in less than 15. You are good. College plans?"

She smiled, "Some. Scholarship would help. Maybe North Carolina."

Bill nodded appreciatively, "Wow. Me too. Cool."

The connection dawned on her. "Never know." She wondered if he would take the next step to ask her out. Her brain said "Yes" with a pause. He was only ten minutes into her male-consciousness. This happened rarely, although she saw some boys socially—a class event, dinner with friends, or a walk holding hands with friendly gestures and words exchanged. She thought no more of it. When it came to boys, they circled her like flies. Her parents encouraged patience.

"Let's get together. Maybe train. You have a place you like to run?"

She nodded, "Yeah, my place. We live out in the country. My dad marked off five miles when I was a kid. "

Bill drew closer to her. She caught a whiff of his scent, soap, maybe Irish Spring. He

asked, "Say Saturday afternoon?"

Josie blushed. All within a few minutes from stranger to friend. "Sure. I'll give you my number." She pulled her cell phone from a fanny pack and handed it to him. "Send yourself a message."

As he did so, their coach blew a whistle to gather the eighteen kids for the usual prep speech—hydrate, pace, any issues, stop.

The boys would run counter to the girls and only see them at the beginning, when they intersected, and when they all gathered at the end for times. Josie glanced toward Bill several times. He took longer stares toward her. Both felt electrified.

Ten minutes in, Josie and three other girls formed a pack to the front. This always happened, and the four would run as a team in meets. They usually won. They worked well together, didn't trip over each other, swapped leads so the other girls could ease their breathing, Bill lead the boys and was the first to see the girls. He yelled to Josie, "Bull in the pasture."

"What?" She didn't expect a conversation.

He came closer without breaking his pace. He panted, "Cows ahead. Bull." He passed her with a touch to her hand.

Josie thought about his presence, their Saturday date. Could she call it a date? *Cows?* Cows were a common sight. They always moved away. Her line of sight brought the cattle into focus. The bull lifted its head as if to assess. The four quickened their pace and moved a few feet apart, as into a row. The bull snorted. The other cows took no interest beyond a nervous shuffling.

The bull suddenly charged as the girls passed him with ten yards separating them. He quickly closed the distance. Josie waved her hand to tell the others to separate further. She could hear the bull, but focused on increasing the separation. Then, without hesitation, the bull's horns touched her buttocks, lifted her into the air, tossing her aside.

Time crawled in that instance for Josie. She was aware of her body's movement. She expected the fall. It happened. Her first thought was to get back to her feet. She stumbled. The bull circled back on her. Her friends turned, running toward the animal. Outnumbered, it lumbered backwards, then stalled to determine his next move.

Josie squealed, "Ow! She sat up, but pain shot through her and she rolled to her stomach. The bull cambered away, his cows safe. The girls kneeled around Josie.

One asked, "Are you OK?"

Josie turned her head, "It hurts."

Another girl touched Josie's shorts, "You might be bleeding. Maybe the horn cut you."

The third runner lifted the waist to examine the taunt flesh, "The bull punctured your butt. Doesn't seem too bad."

The first girl ran ahead, calling back, "I'll get the coach." By now the girls in the team's rear caught up to Josie lying on the ground, and two other girls crouching over her, and the third running off. Quick explanations cleared the stage of any mystery. The outflanked bull

drifted further into the pasture.



Josie laid on the living room sofa. She wore her baggy white shorts with a t-shirt top. A pillow lifted her head. Her mother adjusted the ice pack covering Josie's bottom. "Too cold?"

Josie muttered, "No."

Her mother continued, "We need to change the dressing on that puncture wound, but it isn't serious. Nasty bruise." She paused. "You got some flowers from Bill. Boyfriend?"

Josie propped herself on an elbow. She grimaced. "Boyfriend? No." *Not yet.* "He runs with the boys' team. I don't really know him." *Yet.* She smiled.