

The Running Girl



"I am here to check your vitals," the nurse said.

"What vitals?"

"You know, blood pressure, pulse, temperature."

"Why?"

"Because you are in intensive care."

The nurse flashed the little pointed light above her bed and rolled her sleeve up. Valeria was not sure whether she was dreaming, hallucinating, or confused. The bed did not look like hers and there were other people in the room, behind their curtains.

Was she on stage and this was a theater rehearsal, like the one in high school? But she was older, much older than a teenager, and why was she rehearsing? Before her mind could find an answer, the nurse drew some blood, and that felt very real. She realized she was in a hospital. She was dizzy and disoriented, not sure if it was from the medication that was dripping through her IV or from something else. She asked the nurse, but the nurse did not want to engage in conversations except about her vitals, which she mentioned looked good considering her case.

What is my case? The doctor would tell her more in the morning, and now she needed to rest. In the morning? *What time is it now?* It was dense dark in the night, but no clock to glimpse at, not at least from her bedside. Nobody bothered to pull the blinds completely; the patients got little sleep, anyway. Her head was full of questions, like when her son messed up the pieces of a puzzle and no other part could fit. She was not sure if that mysterious doctor would come, or if she was just abandoned by everybody, and the nurse did not want to tell her. *Why did they leave her?* Before she continued to torture her troubled mind with more inquiries, she was carried away, probably by the IV, into a gravity-free space, where she did not feel the pain in her legs. It was warm and cozy, not wet like on the road.

It was past eleven pm, and Valeria finally was ready to go to bed. Only the ceramic moon nightlight plugged into the switch dispersed yellowish beams on the ceiling of the room. She bent over the crib to kiss her baby's forehead one more time and waited for its irregular and slow breathing to slide down her cheek like butterfly

wings. That night, she kept waiting and waiting, her lips glued to its forehead, but she did not feel the thin stream of air. Panic seized her, and she turned on the light. She hated to wake her baby up, but she had to. Despite the cold sweat of fear running through her spine, she gently lifted the little bundle and checked its nose and neck—quite warm, but no breathing—not even sighing. In anguish, she shook it like maracas, but no sound came from it. She screamed to her husband to call the emergency and feverishly undressed the little body to perform CPR. All was futile. Doctors took the baby's body, and she never saw it again. She could not go to the funeral. She refused to watch the little coffin go into the ground. Instead, she kneeled on the floor in the nursery room, hugged the baby pillow, and inhaled its sweet and sour smell. Since then, years had passed, but she never stopped feeling its chest under her palms pressing against its noncomplying little heart. It couldn't carry on. It gave up on her, but she couldn't give up on it.

Waiting for the family with the dog and the bike to surpass her, Valeria stopped on the side of the trail to stretch. Most of the time, she did not notice the burgundy and brown leaves on the ground, the sun's rays sneaking between the Spanish moss and the oak trees. The fallen leaves glistened like gold and bronze mosaic, like a handcrafted terrazzo in an oriental palace. Too bad people did not have time to savor their loveliness and bring that vision to their busy, rat-race lives. She sighed and continued her run, trying to be one of the rare ones who inhaled the grandeur of the view for a little longer.

“One, two, three...”, Britney Spears started Valeria’s workout playlist, and the dynamic tune added spring to her step. When she was a little girl, she liked to hum to the song, thinking it was about some kind of counting game till later she realized, Oopsie—it wasn’t! In a catchy tune, Britney was singing clearly about an adult game of threesome or foursome right on the floor. *On the floor, on the floor....*

On the floor, next to her father’s feet, she was holding her outcry. Panting heavily, but refusing to weep or speak, she lost her balance after his heavy slap across her face. Valeria had a very strict curfew in high school, which she did not dare to break knowing the short temper of her father. Her friends always teased her that she was Daddy’s girl. She had to go home so early that some of her peers would be just arriving at the party. The mocking did not hurt, but it was not true—she was never Daddy’s girl. To keep the peace at home, she obeyed the rules. However, for her boyfriend’s birthday party, Valeria decided to break her curfew and came home at midnight. She knew she would pay a heavy price, but did not know how much. Her father’s sarcastic interrogation and insults were worse than his slaps, but she made up her mind to endure all of it. Her silence fueled his rage even more, but no words would help her either, so she just clenched her teeth and counted, and counted, and counted...

On the floor, a day after Christmas, she found her mother lifeless. Visiting for the holidays, Valeria was in her former bedroom, reading a book before bedtime, when she heard a thump. It was after midnight and her parents had already gone to bed, but her mom woke up to go to the bathroom and decided to wash the dirty dinner dishes. Unsure of what it was, Valeria jumped out of bed and hurried toward the weak light in

the kitchen. Her mother was sprawled on the floor with her head bent on the bottom cabinet's door. She did not cry out, but shook her softly, calling her name. Her mother's speech was slurred, and she knew she had to act immediately. While waiting for the ambulance to arrive, Valeria kept rubbing her hands and arms, praying. Her prayers were answered partially—her mother lived another ten years, but her left side was paralyzed, and she was bedridden most of the time, unable to communicate clearly and getting confused easily.

On the floor, Valeria's husband found her—motionless and numb. The empty bottle of vodka was to blame, and that's not even counting the Xanax. For weeks, her arms and shins were purple and blue as if she moved a whole truck of furniture by herself. Looking decent at work was a challenge. Valeria had to wear long-sleeve shirts and black pantyhose despite the early summer. Had to retreat to the old excuse that she had low blood pressure and her extremities were always cold, which was partially true.

"On the floor, on the floor..." Valeria murmured, disoriented.

"No, you are not, my dear. I caught you right on time. Your IV was beeping because you slipped to the floor, but now you are back in bed. No worries. I will lift the railings for safety and will bring you some extra pillows." The night nurse kept talking to disperse Valeria's distress.

"Valeria, you may go home now. No need to work late. These files can wait till tomorrow."

“Thank you. Bye, girls, I am having a *block party* tonight.”

“Party, on a Tuesday night?”

“Not that kind of party, but a lot more special.” Valeria winked at them and flew through the double doors.

In need of all her energy, Valeria ate properly the whole day—started with oatmeal, berries, and flax seeds, included avocado and feta cheese in the lunch salad, and had a chocolate shake at the end of the workday. She felt the quick vigor of the sugar and wanted to take advantage of it as soon as possible.

Jamie and she were having a *block party* tonight for six miles. After the warm-up of ten minutes, when they chatted briefly about their day, they got serious: run hard one block, jog for the next; run hard for two blocks, jog for two, run hard for three, jog for three, work back down and repeat until they made the six miles. On Tuesdays, they usually did the shorter run, but the race was coming in two weeks, and they needed to give it a push. After the last charity race, three months ago, Valeria was featured in the local newspaper, and people at the Rec center, where she did her strength exercises three times a week, asked for her guidance and tips for their workouts. She liked to share her experience, especially to motivate the hesitant beginners, but she was not an expert, and it was time-consuming. Since her office job was from eight a.m. to five p.m., Valeria was stingy with her time after work—every minute mattered for her running. Some days she ran in the morning if she had a good night’s sleep, but that was rare. Her running time was untouchable and ‘sacred’. Like her friend, Meg said, “You will let them take anything from you: your house, your car, but not your running time,” and she was

right. It was good to have people recognize her and say good words about her accomplishments, but that was not her goal. She enjoyed her running journey for herself and sometimes she did not want to talk about it or explain it to others. They had to find their path, walk through the muddy waters of their heart, and kick their toes against the rough rocks paving the road to their goal.

While riding the bus home, Valeria smiled at the prospect of wearing her newly delivered pink and green, lightweight, and extra supportive Nike sneakers, and tonight was their night. For a week, she had only worn them inside the house admiring their design and flexibility, preserving their purity, but they were created to venture the roads and to get dirty. When Valeria was a little girl in Bulgaria, she had only one pair of running shoes, made of genuine but rough leather. She kept wearing them, but never got to *break* them; they broke her every time, causing her bleeding blisters. Finally, Valeria outgrew their size and never bought another pair, but she wore her navy canvas shoes for any sports she did. The running experts advised to switch training shoes every day and allow twenty-four hours for the shoes to recover before re-using them. This might be economic-driven advice—to sell more shoes, but she liked it and had thus accumulated a small collection of them. Each pair was bought for a special race or an achieved goal, so all were dear to her heart. She stepped harder on the outside of her feet, close to the heel, so before she ordered the Nike, she took the test in the running shoe store, and these were designed for her. She felt like Cinderella going to the ball, with the only difference, she was not planning to lose any of her precious shoes to a man, even if he were a prince!

With a brisk step, Valeria entered her house and headed toward the bedroom where her running clothes were laid neatly on the bed since the morning. Quickly, she slipped into them with a sigh of relief—after eight hours in a pencil skirt, dress shirt, and heels, it was a delightful change. She hated to be delayed, but she had to plug in her dead phone to listen to her messages in case there was something urgent. The first one was from her mom’s sister, of course. She was giving Valeria elaborate advice on how to trim the garden flowers because it was the right time, and if she missed it for some ungodly reason, she would be forced to wait till their bloom passed. She thought that was it, but no, there were two other messages from Jamie telling her she would not come tonight because her daughter’s tummy hurt. Valeria could not believe her ears! Jamie was calling it off again. She should have picked the chubby, older guy, who nobody wanted as a running partner! She picked Jamie because she was in her thirties, full of energy, and it was invigorating to run next to her. Jamie was looking for challenging runs, and so was Valeria.

Valeria couldn’t hold back her fury and picked up the phone.

“I heard your daughter is not well, but it is only for an hour. Her father can look after her, and before she notices, you will be back home. We have the long run tonight. You can’t skip because we won’t be ready.”

“Obviously, you did not hear me well—I am not coming. I am staying home.”

“But, Jamie, you wanted to improve your time, since the last race? How is this going to happen if you keep calling off practice after practice?” Valeria wasn’t giving up.

“You are so hard to keep up with, Valeria. I will run as prepared as I am. My daughter is more important than your run. Or you already forgot what is to have a sick child, since your son left.”

“You... you just don’t know what are you talking about! My son didn’t leave—his father took him away from me... And I should have never picked a partner who can’t keep up her word!” Valeria hung up the phone, outraged.

What Jamie didn’t know was that the numbers of the runs—their pace and miles—kept Valeria’s life on the right track. If Valeria skipped a practice, it was very, very difficult to come back. Like an addict missing his anonymous meetings. Not only she couldn’t run for over 0.10 miles straight, but panic would seize her so that she couldn’t breathe. It was not her legs that got tired, but she would be out of breath. The doctor said it was not as much her asthma as her stress to blame. Around the two miles, she would be so overheated and thirsty that she would get goosebumps and fever all over her body. Eventually, she got used to the feeling. Jamie didn’t know so many things, and she shouldn’t.

What should I do now? I need Jamie to race with, me so I can work on my speed intervals.

Valeria’s disappointment drained her spirit and energy, and she caught herself slipping down into the valley of hesitation. *This should stop. I should put on my runner’s watch and leave the house as soon as possible. I would do the block party even if I am the only guest.* Her brain was already changing the route and the pace. Valeria turned

up her iPod loudly to push her thoughts away and Freddy Mercury was screaming to the crowd, in a live performance, “The Show Must Go On!” *Yes, he couldn’t be righter.*

She started with an energetic walk till the end of the street where she saw Meg, bundled up in front of her house and holding Bruno’s leash, who was barking and insisting on his evening run.

“It’s going to rain, Valeria. Why don’t you skip tonight?” Meg said, fully realizing that it was not a convincing argument.

“Skipping does not rhyme with my name, darling! What about Bruno? Are you two coming?”

Valeria hoped to have some company, at least for the warm-up.

“You know, I had a cold for the last few days, and I can’t walk in the rain. He has to be happy with the yard tonight.”

“Come on, it is just drizzling. Before it rains, we will be back.”

“No, it is going to pour. You never listen to the weather forecast, do you?”

“Because half of the time they are wrong, and I also do not care. But, look at Bruno. He wants to come for a long run. The yard won’t be enough; he has been at home all day, and he is bursting with energy.”

“Good, but I don’t have any, so he will stay.”

“Let me take him. Jamie called off again, and I was running alone. I know he will love it.”

“I am sure he will. You both are too vigorous for the old lady. All right, just be careful, and do not forget him somewhere, since I know how you shut out the world when you put your headphones on and run.” And Meg handed the leash to Valeria.

“I won’t. Thanks, Meg! We make a great team with Bruno. No broken promises ever.”

Valeria plugged in her music again, not too loud, so she could hear the dog, and her spirit uplifted again. She explained to Bruno, an energetic Brittany Spaniel, the planned route, and he barked approvingly at every word, so she laughed.

“You are my ideal running partner, Bruno. What was I thinking?” She pulled the dog to the middle of the road to isolate him from the distracting smells on the sidewalks. He wanted to run, and so did she.

Like old grumpy men, the clouds gathered and started a fistfight. In tropical places, rain was common, so people ignored the weather warnings, but this time the meteorologists were not urgent enough. The upcoming storm was already blowing up tree brunches and loose garden tools. Heavy drops hit the asphalt. Valeria looked at the sky—even nature was against her *block party* tonight. *All right, all right, you all win. I will cut it short.* And she pulled Bruno to cross the main street between her neighborhood and the Business Park parking lot, broad and vacant after five p.m. There were still some vehicles departing here and there, but that was less of an interruption than zigzagging in between mailboxes, skateboarding teens, and dog walkers. She speeded up the little hill over the creek. *Even the alligators are gone today—don’t like the disturbance—don’t blame them.* Took the straight alley under the widely spread crowns

of the oak trees with the garlands of Spanish moss. On sunny days, she loved running on this stretch of the street because it was the shadiest, but now they were swishing helplessly and the Spanish moss was flying around in patches like flocks of chasing bats. Thump. *Wow! What a heavy branch. Bruno, stay... I promised Meg...* Then, it became dark and wet.

Meg and Jamie came to visit her on the second day of the hospital stay. Both could not stop apologizing—Jamie for not coming and Meg for letting her go. Part of Valeria’s brain registered their presence and good intentions, but part of her wondered why they have been putting her in such a show. Valeria wanted to be in the present, but she wasn’t. Her perception was hanging in-between time. She kept pushing her memory to fill in the blanks, but it only gave her a headache. Observing her body like a stranger, Valeria wondered when those hallucinations would end. The doctor’s team asked her about her name, the day, and the date. She read all of it from the board on the wall, and they said she would be fine, but it would take some patience.

“It was a heavy ladder. The ropes got wet and loose, so the ladder slipped from the roof of the AC van. The driver honked to warn you to move, but you didn’t hear it. He drove you to the emergency room, and they found my number on your phone,” Meg concluded.

Valeria listened to the details of the story with no recollection of any of them. Meg could have told aliens abducted her, and Valeria had to believe her because she had no facts to fill in the gap of six hours when she woke up in the MRI. It was supposed to

scan her brain for damage, but it could also successfully cause brain damage with its high-pitched sounds, which went on for over thirty minutes. Valeria firmly believed that its engineers designed those sounds so sharp and piercing as a test to wake up the dead. *If you don't wake up—then you are permanently dead. Sorry. We tried.*

“Did they call my family emergency contact?” Valeria asked Meg skeptically.

“Yes, they did.” Meg looked away, having nothing else to add.

The following five days, Valeria was monitored for seizures and all other complications that came with a mild concussion. Days and nights merged, more IVs, and nonstop heart monitoring. The first two nights, her room was all windows like a fishbowl and did not have a bathroom—only a potty chair, which she had to use with the help of a nurse. Then, she was moved to a regular room, but her bathroom time was still supervised. Under the influence of the drugs, Valeria was grateful to sleep half of the time because normally she couldn't sleep much at all.

In her awake hours, she listened to the news, which made little sense but was a satisfactory distraction from her thoughts. She tried to read some of the hospital magazines but ended up just thumbing through them because nothing held her attention. Her dreams overlapped like a badly painted mural. Her six-year-old David was running toward her when she picked him up from Pre-K. Laughingly, he waved his paper boat, telling her stories about where he would travel and take her with him. Then, he was putting together his science project about sea turtles and rehearsed his presentation. Glued the text and photos on the poster board, he diligently followed his checklist and refused her help.

Upon discharge, Meg and Jamie came with Meg's van to pick her up. They helped Valeria to get home with the walker, moved around her furniture to make the living room more spacious, and bought her some groceries and frozen dinners. She couldn't ask for better friends. Although she hoped to see one more person, she knew it wouldn't happen and had to accept it.

On rainy mornings, Valeria liked to wake up and listen to the silence of the house. She did not bother to check the clock—she knew she had enough time. Just the act of avoiding looking made the moment infinite. When she removed her mask, she felt the sun rays sliding on her cheeks, which made her squint her eyes, but it was not obtrusive, and she sprung up to another day of living. She admitted there were benefits of hanging thick curtains in the bedroom. With blinds only, the bedroom was lighter at night than in the day; the street lights were brighter than the full-moon nights. She lifted the top cover and ran her hands down to feel her thighs. She caressed the top skin and felt almost nothing like they were submerged underwater for a long time—they were swollen. She sighed, asking herself a question that no doctor could answer. *When will they recover or at least improve?* Six months had passed since the accident, and thank God, her brain had mostly recovered, so she could function without assistance. She pushed her leg from the bed to step on the floor, repeated it with the other leg, and reached for the walker. *It is time to get pretty!*

The alarm went off at five a.m. Coffee with honey, a vanilla protein bar, water with lemon, and a slice of grapefruit to quench her thirst for the next couple of hours. By her tenth 5K race, Valeria already had a routine—her new, but already washed Nikes, her low-cut socks (because no-show socks slid and the sneaker's fabric rubbing against her skin caused her blisters; learned the lesson already), her leggings with the secret pocket for the car key, and her university cap for good luck. No need for sunscreen as the race would be finished by nine a.m.

The morning of the race was intoxicating. The music blasted loudly and she could hear it from a few miles afar. The organizers and volunteers were always too energetic on race day, sometimes even more than the runners. Probably because they were not running, and they had only the pleasure of cheering for the participants when crossing the finish line. But she did not envy them. She did not come to stay on the sidelines. She came here to live through those 3.1 miles with every muscle and breath. She still remembered her first race—she only wanted to finish. Part of her was confident because she did four miles in practice, but part of her was a little intimidated by all those young, fit runners, dressed up with brand names sneakers and leggings. Now, she did not doubt she would finish but wanted to make faster time than her last one, so she could hopefully do 10Ks in the future. Longer races gained more awareness and more funds for charity. This one was for Saint Jude's Hospital, helping cancer-sick kids. Cancer was not for kids. What was God thinking?

She scanned the runners' crowd warming up around the start line. It was easy to spot the leaders of the race in full gear—young and middle age—in bralettes, shorts, fancy running shoes, and the latest model Garmin watches. Just coming to claim

another victory. When she did her fifth race, she recognized most of the faces of the fast runners. She also saw the previous winner, a middle-aged lady, with a long braid, full makeup, and a tiny outfit. She must have been a long-distance runner because she barely sweated after the three miles. And there were the moms with the kids, the girlfriends who ran in groups, and the solo runners like Valeria. All were running from something. Some were running from the fat person they were in the past; some were running from office stress and toxic environment; some were running from diabetes, cancer, or a brain tumor; some were running from painkillers, drugs, and alcohol addiction. But all of them were running to keep their lives together. And so was Valeria.

Ten minutes before the start signal, (they were always accurate at the race—no delays like the airplanes) Valeria saw Bruno running toward her, followed by Meg, waving hello. Valeria hugged and pet him as he swished his tail.

“Hey, buddy. I know you want to run with me, but they don’t allow cute doggies like you in the 5K, so maybe you can do the one mile with Meg, and I’ll see you at the finish. I promise.” Kissing Bruno on the nose, Valeria fastened for the last time her knee brace and ankle support.

“How about me? May I run with you, Mom?” And from behind Meg, her son emerged in a running outfit with a pinned bib number ready to join the race.

“Oh, my... David... you... yes, of course.” Not knowing what to say or where to look, Valeria made him some room next to her as the crowd piled densely for the start.

“Don’t wait for me. I will try to limp as fast as I can, but my goal today is just to finish.”

“And so is mine.” David grinned, which grabbed her heart like a tsunami wave and erupted through her veins, pushing a flood of energy to her muscles.

“All right, son. Let’s do it. But I won’t let you drag with me into the last group. No way, no how.”

The shotgun ended their endearing chat and gave a start to their united run after five years apart, making them the happiest two people in the stream of the huffing and puffing bodies of the race.