

FICTION CONTEST WINNER

Philly

Daryl Murphy

I can see Philly stretching out against the high school's north wall even though it is still more night than morning. The gray cotton sweats define a tall, solid form pushing against the building like Samson shoving down the temple walls. For a moment I hope he can do it. I imagine actually seeing his will and muscle buckle in the school and shove it from its foundation and down the slope onto the tennis courts. But of course he can't, and the school year will grind on. He turns and gives the slightest nod as I jog up.

I get no sense of a problem. He has his usual look of cool distraction. I know better than to hope for a grin. Philly and I are friends, but it is different from any friendship I've ever had. Strange in fact. For one thing, we usually meet at the school instead of each other's houses because of the race thing. My parents made it clear that they didn't like finding a colored kid in their home the one time I had Philly over after school. Since we'd slipped up to my room by the back stairs, my mom hadn't seen us, so the shock was clear on her face and in the way she stammered when she came up with a tray of Cokes and potato chips. She might have snapped the handles from the tray if she hadn't put it down on my desk, which Philly sure noticed. She still gave us the snack, but cut out of there. And when my dad got home, she sent him up quick.

"Nice to meet you - Philly, is it?" he said polite enough, but his smile looked strange, like when my mom makes one of her casseroles. Then he said that as the family was just about to sit down to dinner, we guys should finish up whatever we were doing. What we were doing was giving a listen to *Rubber Soul*, which Philly hadn't heard and said he didn't much like - the voices were too weak and whiny for him with absolutely zero soul - but it was the first time my dad didn't invite one of my buddies to eat with us. Instead he said, "Theo, why don't you walk your friend down?"

By the time we got outside Philly could hardly talk he was so mad, thinking I'd set him up. But that just wasn't true. My folks had always said that only the ignorant said "nigger." Hell, they always spin Nat King Cole and Nancy Wilson records at their parties and brag about cash donations to the NAACP. So how was I to know? The girl that cleans

for us is colored - what's the difference? After that I made it over to Philly's house once or twice, but it was pretty tense the way the coloreds on the street looked at us. Philly's granddad wouldn't even speak to me. Their house smelled funny anyway, and my parents would have killed me if they'd known I'd parked the Mustang on that side of town. Then Martin Luther King got killed. Neither Philly nor I said much about that - except that the world was fucked and I pledged myself his friend through the race war. But there was no way I was going over to the east side after that.

Without so much as a "Good Morning" we jog down the hill and over to the track. Hardly breaking stride, Philly uses his right arm to lift and sail himself over the fence. I follow, and then we're clopping into the turn side by side. We always do a slow quarter-mile warm up. By now the sun is clearing the trees and the main school building, and a shimmering vapor rises and drifts across our path. The air is thick with that sweet green spring smell. It makes me feel better, so good in fact that I want to send the cinders flying as I sprint ahead through the final turn and onto the finish. I want to stand before the bleachers and bellow out a mighty victory yell. But I hold back to keep pace with Philly.

Warming up almost feels routine. Facing each other, we do some jumping jacks, drop and do twenty push-ups eye to eye. When it's time for sit-ups, Philly's legs seem to go stiff and jerk a bit as I grip his ankles. But then he plows into them, barely touching his shoulder blades to the grass before rocketing up and touching each elbow to the opposite bent knee. If this were after school, after the spring heat had built, we'd already be stripped to just our running shorts and shoes. Most of us on the team can't believe Philly's tight torso, the knotty abs and strong arms and shoulders. I work damn hard and don't look near as tight. Behind his back some of the guys say coloreds are just naturally that way. Beneath my fingers, his crisply coiled leg hair scrapes against my palms.

Now we're warmed up, and the morning is warmer, too. The newspaper forecasts a high of seventy - pretty good for early May. We both yank off our sweats at the ten-yard line and time each other in wind sprints. With length in his legs,

Philly is built more for the shorter distances than I am, but even he has never broken ten seconds on the one hundred yards. We've got at least two guys faster than that, so he runs the distances, which he says he prefers. Small wonder. He is sure and steady with incredible endurance. I think he could run from sunrise to sundown if he had to. Once Coach Jones saw that, he knew he had our distance man and everything changed. Especially for me. When you've got a guy who takes off much too fast to last the distance, and yet he keeps pulling away, it makes you panic - you just don't know what he's got in reserve. That's what the other team's runners are thinking, too, and that's what makes Philly a great secret weapon. By the time those other guys find out what he's got is strong, constant speed, it's too late. They may catch and pass him by the second turn, but they've blown it; they peter out. In his own sweet time, Philly just takes back the lead. Me, I was about to quit track. It was too hard, too frustrating. But when Philly joined the team, something made me want to give it another chance. Made me try to keep up. That's what can come of weeks of hard training. If you can stop thinking about winning, it's about keeping up with a guy who's nuts for running and just runs on through the cramps and where his lungs should explode. Then, Bingo! You're right there with him. One day you're as bad as usual, ready to die before you've run half the distance, and a week later your chest doesn't cave in at the half mile, and that extra effort to pick up the pace is worth what used to be pain. Then Philly isn't that far ahead. And even if you never pass him yourself, that doesn't really matter anymore either. Not when you're in the zone. You just go and go, and it's just you and your buddy who feel and understand it. "We got a good pair of milers in you two," Jones said. And that was that.

Coach Jones always thinks about winning. Since we both have him first period for gym, he told us we should use the class time to work on our endurance. He even cleared it with Miss Elston to let us skip homeroom for the extra training. Word is they're dating is the reason why. These extra runs on Saturday mornings were our own idea.

We've got the sweat running now, so we yank off our shirts and start the mile. Philly's pace is a little fast for me, as usual, but I keep even for the first lap just because I like taking in this morning shoulder to shoulder - the light and thickening heat and the smell of cut grass from the inner field, our knees pumping in unison, even how we push from our lungs like one explosive breath. Suck it in quick, and I can even smell the tang of fresh sweat. Then I drop back. We've both hit our strides.

I got Philly to join the team. A few months back he was just Philip Russell, new to our school last fall, and the only colored kid in my homeroom. Everyone knew Miss Elston had one of the two college prep homerooms. We were surprised to see him walk in and take a seat near the door. The only other colored in college prep is Sheila Brown, a Jehovah's Witness who's probably only allowed to look at textbooks anyhow.

A quiet guy, Philly answered roll and did his work and

kept to himself. When the bell rang, he vanished into the hall, and I seldom saw him for the rest of the day. Guys said things, like when John Wallace said that was a colored boy with attitude. Lack of attitude is all I saw. Then we all got into our own school lives. Football, homecoming. Who'd go out with who. I got kinda serious with Donna Palmero. What surprised me, when I noticed, was that Philip Russell didn't hang out with the other coloreds. Even Sheila Brown would show at the western entrance between classes, laughing in their group. The one time I saw Philip Russell anywhere near them, I was returning from my car after lunch with Donna at the Henry's Burgers out by the highway. I'd dropped Donna off at the front, then drove around back and parked. As I approached the building, I saw Philip Russell heading toward one of the mobile classrooms on the south edge of the lot. He nodded at the group as he passed them and kept going. It was Sheila who said, "That boy's fine."

"Too damn fine to hang," one guy said, real sarcastic. I hadn't realized I'd stopped until all eyes turned to me. I moved on.

This semester Philip Russell appeared in two of my classes and my homeroom. I'd been wondering if he had any friends. With all the talk about civil rights in the South, I didn't figure asking the guy if he wanted to ride to the Henry's drive-thru for lunch any big deal. Donna thought it a bad idea, and wouldn't talk. He kept pretty quiet, too, just chewing his burger, so I asked all the questions.

"Where you from?"

"Philly."

"Philly?"

"Philadelphia. Pennsylvania."

"Philip from Philly." I said it a few times because I liked the big-city ring of it, how it fit his broad, brown face and large hands.

It went that way - question then answer - until Donna let a big sigh and said, "Theo." I started the car and got us back to school. But I said something friendly to him every day after that. He loosened up, and talked back. That's how I found out his mom sent him here for the quiet and better schools. That things were getting hot for coloreds in the cities. His face knotted up when he talked about it - cops that shot first. Fighting in the streets. I've got nothing like that to tell - just things like all about helping my dad tune the Mustang's big 390. I had him call me Theo instead of Ted like everyone else but the teachers, and he liked the nickname I gave him. He was good enough at algebra and English to help me out.

We even went to the library together to do some research for our papers on Nathaniel Hawthorne. Miss Elston again, who teaches college English, too, and wants all that dry stuff - where he lived, who he married. His house with seven gables. I picked up a *Sports Illustrated*, asked Philly if he played any sports. He looked built for it. He said he'd played a little hoop back in Philly, but now running was his thing.

"So you going out for track?"

"No. I just run. Clears my head."

I flipped through and found the latest piece on the great Jim Ryun and his training for the Olympics this summer down in Mexico City. Breaking the four-minute mile was my dream, and now I think I could get there. Until Philly came along, nothing broke me through my runner's wall. But Philly had never heard of Ryun or his 3:55.3 record mile three years ago at the age of eighteen. Philly just ran the eastside streets or down along the river in his sweats and black Converse high tops, thinking things through. That's how he put it. I harped and harped on him every day until he agreed to give track a try.

We glide toward the half-mile point with long, strong strides. From eight paces behind, I take in everything about Philly's technique. There's that thing they say about poetry in motion. But, Jesus - you don't think of that crappy "Annabel Lee." There's a Whitman poem Miss Elston had us read, and I practically memorized it once I got it. It's so cool - that train engine with all the "dual throbbing" and "swelling pant and roar." You can see it plowing snow. And that's like Philly - a beautiful, dark machine with molded calves and thick thighs that bunch and lengthen, following its track straight ahead. It's above the waist that gives him away. He leads so much with his shoulders that it's like he's constantly changing direction. The wide shoulders rise and shift stride for stride; the tight trunk torques. Bent at the elbows, the arms swing loosely like twin pistons. The twisting and the rhythm tell me when his speed increases, when he pulls back to coast. I keep pace and loosen my own arms. My shoulders mimic his; I twist hard at the waist and fill and empty my lungs. I hear my blood rush just as Philly must hear his. Philly has taught me to run.

We haven't talked about the day before yesterday. Maybe it's okay, except I see that Philly has gone back to being quiet, even with me. I thought nothing would make trouble between us, not after we got past that time we drove over to pick up Bruce Zollar to shoot hoops at the park. When Bruce came out to the Mustang, he looked in the tiny back seat and said he wasn't riding *nigger*. I don't think he meant anything by it - it was just something the guys say. A way to claim the front is all. But Philly was out of the car and down the road before I could stop him. He wouldn't speak to me for days, and then only when I told him Bruce wasn't allowed back in my car. I didn't mention what Bruce called me when I yelled at him. *Nigger lover*.

Thursday, the day before yesterday, we cut our morning training short because it had started to rain. We figured a quick shower and we could finish the period working on a take-home algebra exam. It had been rotten running anyway. The track was still wet from a storm the night before.

For some reason I felt like teasing Philly about Sheila Brown's crush on him. She had made it pretty clear. They had most of their classes together, and I'd seen her by his locker a lot lately. I guess I thought if it worked out then Donna wouldn't mind him around so much. Maybe we could double date.

I told him, "Sheila digs you, man."

He pulled off his track shoes and glared at me. "She's a cow."

"Aw, come on. She's pretty."

"Damn Seventh Day holy roller or something. Those skirts all down to her ankles."

"I thought all coloreds were heavy religious. What's it matter which church?"

"Man, you really can be a fool."

The way he grabbed his towel and stomped off to the shower room told me I'd said too much again. I'm always getting things wrong.

He was soaping up his hair when I got there. Eyes closed to keep the suds out. All the showerheads going to make it steamy the way we like it.

It was just a joke. Something to break his bad mood. So I slipped up and grabbed him from behind. He yelled, "Goddam it!" as I staggered to lift him off his feet, trying not to slip on the tiles. I did my best to imitate Sheila's voice, squeaking out, "Oh, come on, daddy, daddy. You sure are fine."

I realize now that that was the first time I'd really touched Philly except for a few jabs to the arm. He'd tried showing me a special handshake a few times, but that's not the same. When two guys can finally make contact, like wrestling or even come at each other swinging if they have to, it makes things loose. They can start to get tight. Maybe that's what I was feeling. Not that we're matched for wrestling. It's not just that Philly's taller - he's got more arm strength than me. And we were both wet. His back slid against me, and he broke my grip with this twisty judo move. My right arm ended up behind my back. His breath hit my neck and he clamped his left arm up under my throat.

"You little fucker." But he was laughing and I was laughing and straining to break his hold and take him down. Then he said, "God Damn!" like something really had gotten him, right when it hit my belly like a lead pipe - my own dick. We broke apart, Philly between me and the door, staring. We just stood there in what felt like the Grand Canyon of showers, all echoes and filling with steam. I shoved my hand on down, but just touching it made my legs want to buckle. I turned away and ducked under one of the running showerheads. Just stood there with my eyes closed, water from the showers filling my ears. Willing myself soft and everything all right again. And I still could see the weird tightness in Philly's face, and the jut of his dark, wet dick.

I was alone when I opened my eyes. I didn't know what else to do, so I soaped up and rinsed and soaped and rinsed. Philly was dressed when I got back to the lockers, sitting on the bench scribbling on paper. His shirt was wet. He had hardly bothered to towel off, he'd thrown his clothes on so fast. I don't know what I would have said. He didn't look up from his algebra book, just said, "Hurry up and dress. I got the answer to number twelve if you want it."

Could a guy eat or sleep after that? When I got home, I went right to my room. My mom stood in my door, eyes

narrowed and looking me over when I said I didn't want dinner even though my appetite had tripled once the track season began. But she believed me when I groaned about an upset stomach. I had to sip at some broth for her. When she left it on my desk, I just lay on my bed, feeling a swarm of bees in my gut and arms and legs, but everything too heavy to move. It's not that I hadn't had hard wood in front of another guy before. Back when we were dumb eighth graders, Byron Shiller and Lem Krause and me watched each other pound 'em a few times. No big deal. Lem said Mark Sears and Scotty Allen showed him how, and he showed us. But that got old, and I sure didn't want to turn queer. That's Deter Strebbs with his long, greasy hair and zip-up Beatle boots. Even some teachers roll their eyes when he stomps by in his stovepipe trousers and purple shirts. Me, I love Donna.

Funny, though, how lying in bed all those hours with the light and kid's voices and traffic dying down in the street, tensing when I hear my parents on the stairs and later feeling the house settle into dark and quiet, I just couldn't sleep.

The things you can think about when you're awake all night. For a while it's just *Why can't I sleep?* Then maybe it's guy stuff - like what it even means being a guy and how no one tells you anything - as if a manual came with the plumbing.

There's Mr. Metzger, the compact guidance counselor with a forest creeping up behind his loosened tie, talking like he's been inside my head so he knows I'm smarter than my C average. He's younger than most other teachers, and the girls all watch him walk down the hall like he owns it. He knows they're watching, and some sure blush when he speaks to them. Or those times he swings into a bathroom, gives you a nod, adjusts himself in front of the mirror, then wets a comb and slicks down his thick head of hair. And there he is - the guy who could *write* the manual about the cool every guy wants to be.

There's some of that in Philly, too. He's quiet and keeps to himself but somehow still comes off as cock of the walk. So I thought through all the things I feel about Philly and wondered why I feel them.

Philly was absent from school yesterday. It was sort of a relief, even if I was exhausted. Every class dragged, Donna got pissed that I didn't talk to her much at lunch, and then Coach Jones yelled at me for barely making it through calisthenics and wind sprints. When I tried to run the quarter-mile, I really thought I was going to puke.

After practice Donna was waiting for me outside the locker room. She'd been home and changed into a pink sweater and plaid skirt, and she'd curled her hair.

"I thought it would be easier to slip out and meet you here," she said, reminding me that her parents were playing

Bridge with Cindy Walsh's parents, so she and I were going to grab quick burgers and Cokes and then go to Cindy Walsh's party. All I really wanted was to get back to my bed, but what could I do?

The usual was happening at the party: the latest records blaring, dancing, a little sampling of the forbidden bar, some pairing off into dark rooms. When I got Donna alone on Cindy's bed, I kissed her so hard our teeth scraped. I took in all of her that I could: the flower smell at her throat and behind her ears, the taste of peppermint schnapps on her tongue, and the soft give of her skin. It wasn't two seconds before my hand wriggled up that sweater and under the cups of her bra. After a bit I burrowed under the skirt and Donna pressed herself against my hand, saying "Nooo" in her whispery way. She never lets me go into the panties, but it's something to feel her through the cloth. We were both breathing hard, and for the first time she put her hand on top of mine, guiding and pressing down on my fingers. She moved her other hand to me, and I panicked when not much happened down there.

It was like I was spinning, and then when I got things to slow again somehow I had Philly in my head. It's terrible, but I was focused on what I remembered: the shower spray pounding that dark skin. It's a thought I didn't want to have, but it caught in my head, and then came the charge and Donna breathing hard. Her hand moved my hand, finally free to go beyond elastic. I can't count how many times I've beat off imagining it, so it's not that I don't love her or want her. It was just wrong. I bolted up, shushing her before she could say anything. Claimed I'd heard someone at the door. We both heard a giggle outside, and when Cindy knocked and called our names, I knew I was covered.

Once again Philly has pulled me through with his strong, easy pace. I've pursued him for fifteen hundred yards, stride for stride. And I can't say why. His upper body torques fast and hard, his arms swing, his legs reach maximum drive. Cinders fly from his feet. This is only practice. He could lag behind for once, let me win. But then I'd miss watching day broaden on his back and how the deep valley between the shoulder blades becomes ink black with shadow until it swings back into the light. I don't want to lose sight of how he tilts back his head in the last stretch or of the powerful lift of his butt beneath those running shorts, right, then left, yard after yard. To be Jim Ryun you have to want the glory, and that isn't my focus now. Philly begins his kick, the real suck and blow. Into the final turn and somehow I pull beside him. We're all breath and effort and thudding feet. He's a steady, shining outline - that profile in the corner of my eye. I'd have to reach deep to want to explode beyond him. His feet catch fire, and I'm alone.