

HARRY MILLER'S RUN



For Brendan and Beth

DA

*For Nick and Lisa and the boys,
Joshua, Daniel and Matthew*

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HARRY
MILLER'S
RUN



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I don't want to go to Harry Miller's. It's Saturday morning. My entry for the Junior Great North Run's just come through the post. I'm already wearing the T-shirt. I'm already imagining belting round the quayside and over the bridges in two weeks' time. I'm imagining all the running kids, the cheering crowds. I'm dreaming of sprinting to the finish line. I phone Jacksie and we end up yelling and laughing at each other. His stuff's come as well. He's number 2594. I'm 2593. We can't believe it. But we say it's fate. We've been best mates for ever. We say we'll meet up straight away and get some training done in Jesmond Dene.



But soon as I put the phone down, Mam's at my shoulder.

"Don't go, Liam," she says.

"Eh?"

"Come with me to Harry's. It's his last day in the house. He'll need a friendly face around."

"But, Mam!"

"Come on, just an hour or two. Just for me."

"But I haven't got time, Mam."

She laughs.

"You're eleven years old. You've got all the time in the world."

So in the end I sigh, phone Jacksie again and put him off till the afternoon, and I slouch down the street with my mam.



Harry's ancient. We've known him for ever. He lives at the end of our street and he was fit as a lop till the heart attack got him. It looked like the end but he was soon fighting back. A few days in intensive care, a couple of weeks in Freeman Hospital, and before we knew it he was back home in Blenkinsop Street. He started tottering around his little front garden on his Zimmer frame, tottering past our window to the Elmfield Social Club. He stood gasping at street corners, grinning at the neighbours, waving at the kids. When he saw me out training, he'd yell, "Gan on, young'n! Keep them pins moving!" And I'd wave and laugh and put a sprint on. "That's reet, lad! Run! There's a wolf at your tail! Run for your life!"



Everybody knows Harry. Everybody loves him. The women in the street take him flasks of tea and sandwiches and plates of dinner. His mates from the club call in with bottles of beer to play cards and dominoes with him. The district nurse visits every day and she's always laughing when she comes out his front door. But one day she found him with a massive bruise on his head after he'd had a fall. One day he was out wandering the street in his stripy pyjamas. It couldn't go on. There was nobody at home to look after him. It was time for him to leave the house, get rid of tons of stuff and move into St Mary's, the new nursing home just off Baker's Lane.



Mam took it on herself to help him clear out. "Poor soul," she said. "How on earth'll he bear up?" But Harry didn't seem to find it hard at all. Out went all his stuff, to charity shops and fetes and the town dump: pots and pans, dishes, tables and chairs, clothes, a radio, an ancient TV.

"What are they?" he said. "Nowt but things. Hoy them oot!"

He just laughed about it all.

"I'll not need much in the place where I'm gannin'. And for the place past that, I'll not need nowt at all."





We walk down the street to Harry's. Mam lets us in with a key. By now, just about everything's gone. The floors are bare. There're no curtains at the windows. He's sitting in the front room in a great big armchair with a box full of papers on his lap and the Zimmer frame standing in front of him. There's a little table with boxes of tablets on it. He looks all dreamy but he manages to grin.

"How do, petal," he says.

"How do, Harry."

Mam bends down and kisses him. She pushes some hair back from his brow. She says has he washed this morning, has he brushed his teeth, has he had breakfast, has he...

"Aye," he says. "Aye, hinny, aye."

He stares at me like he's staring from a million miles away.

"It's the little runner," he says at last.

"Aye, Mr Miller."

He reaches out and touches the T-shirt. His hand's all frail an' trembly.

"Great North Run?" he says.

"Aye, Mr Miller."

"I done that."

"Did you really, Harry?" says Mam. "And when was that?"

He reaches towards me again.

"How old are ye, son?"

"Eleven."

"That was when I done it. When I was eleven."



Mam smiles sadly at me.

“Must’ve been great,” she says.

“It was bliddy marvellous, pet.”

He closes his eyes. Mam lifts the box from his lap. It looks like he might be dropping off to sleep, but he jumps up to his feet and grabs the Zimmer frame. He leans forward like he’s ready to run.

“It’s the final sprint!” he says.

He giggles and drops back into the chair.

“Tek nae notice, son,” he says. “I’m just a daft old maddled gadgie.”

He looks at the box.

“Them’ll need to be gone through,” he says. “Ye’ll help us, hinny?”

“Course I will,” says Mam.

He sighs and grins, and stares past us like he can see right through the walls.

“I can see the sea, mates!” he says. “We’re nearly there!”

