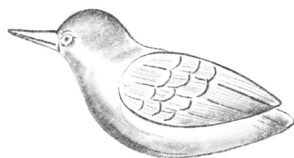


WHAT IF THE FINISH LINE ISN'T THE END OF THE RACE?

HALF MOON SUMMER



ELAINE
VICKERS



BIRTH DAY DREW

Every day there are about 385,000 babies born in the world.

Think about it: hundreds of thousands of people with not just your same birthday, but your same Birth Day. When that day started, all 385,000 of you were floating around in the dark, eating and breathing through a cord in your belly, happily swallowing your own pee.

Until it all changed. Until you were pushed from that safe, small, warm world and out into bright lights, cold air, and way too much space, whether you liked it or not.

That's how the big changes happen: *Whether you like it or not.*

I was born in Half Moon Bay, California, on September 23—the very last day of summer that year. I started out like you did, all slimy and grumpy. I screamed like a smoke alarm when Mom tried to feed me and screamed louder when Dad tried to rock me.

Finally, the nurse couldn't take it anymore, so she wedged me into the same bassinet with the other baby who was born that day.

That was the only thing that got me to calm down.

True story.

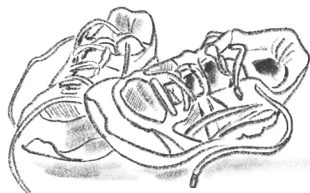
The next morning, both of us were healthy and ready to go home. Except there was some problem with the paperwork, so it took longer to release us than it should have. Dad sat in the waiting room, pulling his knife across little pieces of wood while the shavings fell like snowflakes into the garbage can. By the time everything was sorted out, he had carved two little birds for the two newborn babies in that bassinet nest.

I've lived in Half Moon Bay ever since, but the other baby left with her family, never to return. Or that's what I thought, anyway.

Pushed from one world to another.

It happened the day we were born, and again the summer before we turned thirteen.

Whether you like it or not.



1

DREW

On the first day of summer vacation, I grab a shovel and head into the fog before the sun's up, looking for buried treasure. Or, okay, not really treasure, but whatever Isaac and I put in the taped-up-shoebox time capsule we buried on the last day of summer vacation last year.

The plan was to dig it up together today and pick up right where we left off. But plans change, so I'm here alone.

Luckily, I'm not totally alone, because I've got my dog, Scout, the greatest golden Lab in history. She runs ahead to check out a gopher hole, then boomerangs back to nudge me along toward the cypress grove.

Even though I don't mean to, I keep wishing I could wind back the clock to *last* summer.

Back before I was old enough (and responsible enough) to babysit my little sister every afternoon.

Back when I hadn't aged out of Little League and when everybody who tried out got a spot on a team somewhere.

Back when my best friend still lived here and I had somebody to hang out with and a hundred fun things to do on any given day, because we could do them together.

I text Isaac, even though he's probably not awake yet.

On my way to the grove to dig up the time capsule

Do you remember where we buried it

Do you remember what's in it

Won't be the same without you

Isaac's family moved to the city last month for his mom's job. After that, everything reminded me of him. I'd pass the hoop where I'd beaten him at a hundred games of H-O-R-S-E and want to challenge him to one more. I'd reach for extra ketchup packets for him on fry-day Friday in the cafeteria. More than once, I waited for him by the flagpole after school until I remembered he wasn't coming.

Isaac's grandparents still live in Half Moon Bay, so he'll still come down every once in a while, but I have no idea how I'm supposed to fill this summer without backyard hoops and gaming marathons and trips to the beach. Summer break has never seemed long enough, but it might seem too long if I have to spend it all alone.

As I wander around the grove, trying to remember where we buried the time capsule, I check my phone, but Isaac hasn't texted back. Maybe he's still asleep. Or maybe he's moved on with city friends who are cooler than me. Maybe the rubber band of our friendship has been

stretched too far since he left, and even when he comes to visit and we're finally un-stretched, everything will be not-tight and wrong-shaped. Because, if I'm being honest, he barely even texts anymore.

I have other friends, but they're school friends, or basketball friends. Friends for one specific setting or sport. Isaac was my only anywhere friend, and now it feels like he's nowhere at all.

A bulldog barks at Scout from down the road, and she tries to bark back with the hoarse, high bark her terrible first owners left her with.

"Hey, girl," I say. "Don't worry. We're okay." She pushes her nose against my palm, and I stroke her soft, honey fur: between her ears, over her neck, down her back. We've trained each other, me and Scout.

Then suddenly, Scout stands at attention.

Somebody's coming.

But somebody turns out to just be Dad, rattling through the fog in his old blue truck. He parks and climbs out, thin legs shooting down from basketball shorts like mine, hair cut too close to be as messy as mine.

"Wow, Drew," he says, pulling a bright orange box from the passenger seat and hiding it behind his back like I haven't already seen it. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Fancy as a bologna sandwich."

Dad laughs and ruffles my hair. "Yeah, okay, I came looking for you. Hard to believe you'll be old enough to work in the shop with me next summer."

“Yeah. Hard to believe.” At least that part I can agree with. I used to love Dad’s shop: the smell of sawdust, the back-and-forth of the guys’ jokes and stories. But even though I have zero plans this summer, I’m not sure I’m ready to spend next summer there. All grown up. Working.

“What are you up to this morning?” Dad asks.

“Not much. Just looking for buried treasure.”

Dad looks around. “Hmm. By yourself?”

Scout barks again, and Dad laughs. “I didn’t mean it. Of course he’s got you.”

But do I? Scout’s already distracted by some other dog’s pee on a rock, which seems like a good idea. (Getting distracted. Not peeing on a rock.)

Dad scratches Scout behind her ears. “Find anything?”

“Nah,” I say, dropping the shovel in the back of his truck because I don’t even know where to dig and I feel kind of embarrassed holding it. “But I think there might be something behind your back?”

Dad swings the box around and holds it out. “There sure is! A surprise for you.”

“Oh,” I say, kind of surprised. I take the box and flip the lid, and holy cheese nuggets, there they are: black and gray Nikes with bright orange soles and laces. San Francisco Giants colors. The most beautiful shoes I’ve ever seen. People write songs about shoes like these. They even have a smell—one that says *Nike factory* instead of *knockoff*.

“Try them on,” Dad says, even though the solid white seven on the side of the box tells me they’ll fit.

When I slide my feet inside, the feeling goes beyond “fit.” When I tighten the laces, it’s like these shoes were put on this earth to hug my feet.

“Test them out,” he says. “Tag that tree and come back.”

“Are you sure?” I ask. “I don’t think we can take them back if I wear them.”

Dad nods and waves me away. So I tag the tree and turn around, and I swear these shoes are like tiny trampolines. When I start to take them off, Dad reaches out to stop me. “What if we take them for a longer test drive?”

“Can’t we just shoot hoops?” Dad and I have been playing basketball together since I was old enough to dribble. It wouldn’t be the same as playing with Isaac, but it would sure be better than running.

But Dad’s not giving up. “I thought maybe we could try something new. Give Scout a chance to run with us?”

“I guess,” I say. Maybe we could run past Isaac’s grandparents’ house, super casual, and just see if his family happens to have come for a surprise visit.

Dad slaps me on the shoulder. “To the pier and back. Last one in the truck has to make breakfast.” And he takes off, before I’ve even thanked him for the greatest shoes I’ve ever owned. (Or asked him if we can actually afford them.)

We cross Highway 1, then follow the path that winds between the road and the coast, dividing the land from the sea. As we run, Dad starts telling me his whole life story: about his first running shoes, and working in the shop when he was thirteen, and getting his driver’s license

on the second try after he nearly took out a fire hydrant on his first test.

“Did I ever tell you about the truck I drove, back when I was a teenager? It used to be your grandpa’s, and it was a piece of junk. I swear the air conditioner blew hot air. And the thing couldn’t even drive in reverse.”

We both laugh at that. “Wait, what? How did you get out of parking spaces?” I ask.

“I had to get really creative. Mostly I searched for spots on the curb where I could just drive away after. Either that, or I’d throw it in neutral and have my friends push me backwards. Or a passing stranger. I do not recommend any of this, by the way.”

Even with Dad’s stories, I swear time stretches and it takes years to get to the old pier. My strategy is just to survive this run and to keep up with Dad, then outsprint him at the end. With these shoes, I’m pretty sure anything’s possible.

But when we reach the pier, Dad pulls away and gets there first. Even though this is only the turnaround and not the finish line, I wonder if I need a new strategy.

“Hey,” he says. “I might as well give you my breakfast order now. French toast and bacon, please.”

Oh, nope. I can’t let that happen. So even though I’m still tired and my breathing sounds like double-speed Darth Vader, I shoot into the lead and fight to stay there.

Dad’s footsteps beat a steady rhythm behind me and Scout, louder than both of us combined. Every time he

gets too close, I speed it up a little, because I'm not losing this thing.

After a while, I realize Dad's breathing matches his steps.

In two, out two.

In two, out two.

So I make my own rhythm, lining up my breath to the steady tempo of my new shoes.

In two, out two.

The fog has all burned off now, and the sun beats down on our backs. I grab the bottom edge of my T-shirt and use it to swipe the sweat from my forehead.

In two, out two.

Scout's quieter as she pads and pants beside me. But I know she's got a rhythm of her own, and it makes me feel like we're doing something wild and free that we were always meant to do.

I can feel my phone in my pocket, slapping against my leg with every other step. Has Isaac texted me back yet? Does he remember where the time capsule is? Does he even remember it at all? Does it matter anyway, if he's not here to open it with me?

In two, out two.

Eventually, I see the hill. The morning has gone 0 percent how I planned it, but when I push up that final rise and slap the back of Dad's truck first, I have to admit it gives me a rush. I try to hang on to that even though something inside me still feels like it's been scooped out.

When Dad comes huffing up the hill, I slap a smile on my face and turn his breakfast order around on him. “French toast and bacon,” I say. I’m panting harder than Scout, and then I put my tongue out like hers. Dang, that does feel kind of good.

That’s when I notice: Dad’s huffing, but not that hard.

“How did you do that?” I ask. “You’re not a runner.”

Dad smiles. “I used to be. And I’m a runner today.” He closes his eyes. “Think of all those years I wasted in between.” His breathing’s totally back to normal by the time he climbs into the truck.

He didn’t let me win, did he?

The question sits in my throat the whole sweaty drive.

Back at home, my quads scream with every one of the twenty stairs between me and our apartment above the woodshop, and I can already tell my pasty skin might be headed for a sunburn. As soon as Luna sees me, she reaches up from her high chair with oatmeal-coated hands. “Out, Dew, out!”

I reach to unbuckle her, but Mom flicks my hands away with her dish towel. “Eww, no.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “I’m not afraid of oatmeal.”

“The ‘eww’ was for you,” Mom says. “Can you smell yourself?”

Right then, Dad sneaks in and kisses her on the cheek. She swats him too, but she’s smiling. “Both of you, take a shower.”

“I owe this kid French toast and bacon,” Dad says, opening the fridge.

But Mom grabs him by the shoulders and points him down the hall, then opens the big drawer under the oven and pulls out a frying pan. “Hurry and shower so Drew can have a turn. I’ll make breakfast.” Which is surprising, because Mom makes pretty decent dinners, but her idea of making breakfast is opening the cereal box for us.

As long as I get bacon, though, I’m not going to argue.

We only have one bathroom, so we’ve all learned to shower superfast. Dad’s clocks in at under five minutes and mine’s even quicker. By the time I towel off, suit up (including my new shoes), and open the bathroom door, the smell of breakfast rushes in as the steam rushes out.

In the kitchen, Luna’s marching around with an oatmeal beard. The rest of her is cleaned up, though, so I let her sit on my lap instead of strapping her back in the high chair for second breakfast. (Luna eats about eight meals a day right now. Or zero, depending on her mood.) Things are going great until Mom asks the unanswerable question.

“What are you up to today, Drew?”

“Nothing.” The word comes out with a sharp edge, and I wish I could take it back and sand it smooth. It’s not Mom’s fault this summer is going 0 percent how I hoped it would.

Mom glances at Dad, and he gives a little shrug. “I

kind of thought he could keep me company down in the shop after we clean up our mess here.”

Great. My last summer before I get swallowed up by the shop and I’m going to start it out . . . in the shop.

But I don’t want to hurt Dad’s feelings. “I’ll come down and draw,” I tell him, which is a pretty decent compromise.

“Sounds good to me. Now, who’s hungry?” Mom asks, bringing a plate of French toast to the table as Dad flips the bacon.

“Firsty!” Luna says, reaching for my milk, and all three of us say, “Two hands, Luna!”

But it’s too late. The milk tips and spills, coating the table and dripping onto the floor.

Mom grabs the dish towel. I scoot my chair back and duck down to help out, but she’s just staring at my sneakers.

“Where did you get those?” She’s as surprised by the brand-new Nikes as I was, but not in a good way.

Dad clears his throat and grabs the glass, even though it’s pretty much empty. “They were on clearance,” he says, without looking up at her. “Pretty sweet, huh?”

Mom opens her mouth to say something, but before she makes a sound, the glass clatters from Dad’s hand and onto the table, and none of us are quick enough to grab it before it rolls off and falls to the floor. It doesn’t shatter, but one crack appears down the side, fast as lightning and shaped like it too.

My parents freeze.

The glass might be ruined, but it's just a glass. Just a little mistake. So why are they both staring at Dad's hand? I take the rag from Mom and start mopping up the milk on the floor.

My best summer ever is officially off to the worst start possible.

Except the second that thought pops into my mind, I wish I could take it back, because I can't shake the feeling that things could be so much worse.

Couldn't they?