

For those who like historical curiosity, compare this first chapter of Fast Finish with the published version. This is how Fast Finish started: the main character was Melissa Meyers (no relations to Noah, who appeared in the published version) and she loved running as much as Noah did. This is the version I first sent to Lorimer.

CHAPTER ONE

There is a moment in every race, just before the starter's signal, when time stands still. Melissa Myers tenses, her legs coiled, like an over-wound clock.

Go!

Miss Hoffman, her eighth grade teacher, claps her hands for the starting signal and the pack of runners are off.

Melissa glides easily to the lead, her long legs churning, her ponytail bouncing. Running to her comes easily. Without effort, she stretches to the finish line, reaching the skipping rope a full yard ahead of Judy Boyes.

Breathless Judy Bowes. For Judy is panting, sucking air as she approaches Melissa.

"Congratulations," she says. "You make it look so easy. I don't know why I even try."

Melissa smiles. "It's only a picnic race," she says.

"Yeah," says Judy, "but every picnic I've ever been to, you win every race."

Which was true. Melissa loves to run. She runs to and from school, to Uncle Max's apartment eight blocks away, to the corner store, she runs at noon hour and she runs at recess, her long legs gliding easily, her pony tail swishing from side to side.

Miss Hoffman pins the winning ribbons. Second place to Judy Boyes, first place to Melissa Myers.

"What else is new?" yells Brent Hollis, his baseball cap twisted backwards on his head. "'Miles' Myers wins again!"

"Winning," says Miss Hoffman, "is not a bad thing to do."

Later, after the races, after salmon sandwiches and chocolate cookies, after lemonade in weak paper cups, Melissa

runs home, her pony tail bobbing, her ribbon flapping in the breeze.

Melissa dashes in the side door. Her mother is in the kitchen, account books and bills spread out on the table in front of her. Uncle Max, her mother's brother, is filling the coffee maker.

"Picnic okay?" asks her mother.

"The usual. Pink lemonade. Honestly, Miss Hoffman thinks we're still in Kindergarten."

Uncle Max turns from the counter. "See ya got a ribbon. You musta had a foot race."

"Yeah. Just my feet. I took them off and said, `Go!' and they won."

"Someday you should get in a foot and leg race," replies Uncle Max.

Melissa's Mother smiles. "Anyway, congratulations. You can add that ribbon to the others in your room."

Melissa makes a face. "Anybody can win a picnic ribbon," she says. "I'm a teenager now, remember? Ribbons like this are kid stuff."

Uncle Max and Mrs. Myers exchange shrugs. As though to say, 'Well, this is another stage of growing up, I wonder what happens next?'

Adam comes crashing through the kitchen door. He is ten, wears a baseball cap sideways and carries a ball glove. He checks the cookie jar.

"Baker on strike?" he asks, coming up empty. "Hey, can I have a cup of coffee then?"

"Not on your life," says Uncle Max. "I'm just dropping in for a visit, but let me catch you drinking coffee I'll tar you. It'll keep you outta the big leagues for sure."

Adam plays baseball. No, breathes baseball. He would, as Uncle Max says, give his right leg to play in the big leagues someday.

"That's silly!" says Melissa. "If he . . . "

"That's Max!" says Mrs. Myers.

Uncle Max shrugs. "You look so disgusted with me you could cut off my head and throw it in my face!" he says.

"Oooo," says Melissa.

"We got store bought cookies?" asks Adam. "Hey! See you got a ribbon. Must've been a race against all the fat girls in your class."

"Adam! Why can't you just congratulate me?" Melissa replies. Adam loves to tease.

"I guess compared to you, all the girls in your class are fat girls," Adam replies.

Uncle Max snickers.

"Want to play catch?" Adam asks, tossing a glove to Melissa.

Melissa smiles. "Race you to the park!"

But the park is half a block away and it is no race. Melissa is standing in the middle of the diamond tossing the ball up and down by the time Adam gets there.

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When they return from the park there is a telephone message waiting for Melissa.

"It's Bill Judge of the Viking Track Club," says her mother. "He would like you to call him right back. He said he saw you run at the school today. He wants to talk to you about your joining the Vikings."

Nervously, Melissa picks up the phone. Gingerly, she pushes the buttons, almost afraid to hope.

The Vikings are the best, the fastest track club in all of Clarington. The Clarington Vikings.

This is like a dream come true.