

Learning to Fly

By Twishaa Kartik, grade 7

The first time I broke five minutes in the mile, I didn't feel tired or even relieved.

I felt untouchable. Like gravity had loosened its grip on me for exactly four minutes and fifty-eight seconds.

The clock flashed the time 4:58.62 in bright red numbers above the track, and for a moment, everything went quiet. Not actually quiet- people were screaming, my teammates were pounding at the fence, and Coach was running towards me- but the sound felt distant, like I was submerged underwater and the world was somewhere on the surface.

Coach grabbed my shoulders, his face flushed in utter disbelief.

“Do you know what you just did?”

I did.

I had just become the fastest girl in school history.

Newspapers called me unstoppable before the week was over. Colleges started sending me letters, adorned with golden crests and the promise of scholarships. Freshman stared at me when I walked through the hallway. Competitors stopped making small talk at the start line, their eyes sharpening as they glanced at me.

I liked the way fear looked on them.

Running was logical to me- it made sense in a way nothing else did. The rules were clean and honest. If you worked harder than everyone else, you won. If you were hurting, you pushed harder. Effort translated to outcome. Life outside was hazy and unpredictable, but inside lane four, everything was sharp.

Footstrike. Breathe. Repeat.

By junior year, my bedroom wall was enveloped in medals that clinked softly whenever the air conditioner turned on. My future felt mapped out in clean, straight lines: dominate senior year, win state, get a scholarship, qualify for nationals. I didn't just hope for it- I expected it. It felt guaranteed

It happened on a Wednesday afternoon in October, underneath a sky so stupidly blue it felt artificial.

Practice had ended early because of an upcoming meet, and I was replaying the splits I needed to make as I stepped onto the crosswalk outside school. My headphones were in, music low enough that I could still hear the traffic.

A horn blared.

I turned.

There's this strange fraction of a second where your mind comprehends danger but your actual body hasn't processed it yet. Time stretched out. The truck was closer than it should've been, moving quicker than what made sense.

I tried to jump back. I couldn't.

Metal hit bone.

The sound wasn't explosive. It was dull, almost final, like someone slamming a locker shut.

I collapsed, headphones laying somewhere beside me, my tinny music faintly playing into the hot cement. I felt a gnawing pain radiating from my lower half.

I attempted to move. My right leg wouldn't respond.

I tried to look down, but the world started spinning and would not steady.

Everything blurred as I plunged into darkness...

White. I woke up to white.

White ceiling, white sheets, and the low whirring of hospital machines.

I saw my parents stand up at the sight of my eyes flickering. They looked as if they'd been waiting for a while.

"Mara..." my mom breathed, her voice slightly cracking, "They saved you."

I looked down, and there was a thick roll of bandages that ended just below my right knee. Tears pricked at my eyes, sharp and stinging, the weight of it all sinking in.

Save.

My mom wiped her tearstained face and walked into my dad's arms. He couldn't meet my gaze.

My first thought wasn't about walking. It was about running.

My chest felt tight, and I couldn't draw a full breath as a dull ache spread through my body with every thought I tried to push away.

There are no scholarships for half a runner.

I pressed my lips together, willing myself not to cry, but the hurt was too close to its breaking point- tremulous tears brimming at my lashes, threatening to spill over no matter how hard I tried to hold them back.

I pulled up the covers and didn't speak to anyone for the rest of the day.

Or the next two.

The hospital room became my cage. Nurses moved about. Machines beeped. My parents tried to fill the palpable silence with soft updates about school- who had visited and which teachers had emailed.

But I didn't want updates. I wanted to run.

On the third day, Coach came.

I knew it was him even before I opened my eyes. His voice rang out in the hallway- steady, in control, as though he were giving instructions on race day. When he stepped into my room, he almost seemed smaller. Not physically shorter, just weakened- shrunk. Like something took the certainty out of him.

"Hey kid," he said quietly.

I didn't respond. I gazed up at the ceiling.

He pulled a chair and sat beside my bed. I heard the slight sound of metal scraping against the tiled floor. For a while he just sat there. Didn't speak. I wondered if he was trying to figure out if the version of me sitting in the bed was the record breaker, the champion. Or just a girl who couldn't feel where her calves should've been.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of awkward tension, he spoke.

"I talked to the team," he said, "They're running for you at the meet this weekend."

I swallowed, a lump forming in my throat.

"Don't," I sulked, "They're running for themselves."
He let out a breath that mimicked a laugh.

"That's my girl." he grinned.

I lifted my head from the covers and turned slightly, just enough to see him. His eyes darted down to the bandaged end of the bed, and then back to my face. It was so quick, you could've missed it if you blinked.

But I saw it. Pity.

"I'll be back by springtime." I said, resolutely.

I put my foot down. Metaphorically, obviously. Hah, how ironic.

Coach's jaw tightened.

"Mara-" he began.

"I'll be back," I repeated, "And I mean it. You said effort translates to outcome. I've never been outworked, and I'm prepared to work harder."

He didn't respond, but his silence felt louder than any answer.

He stayed for another fifteen minutes, talking about practice times and a freshman who had potential. He never mentioned recovery times or prosthetics. Or the fact that I no longer had ankles to dominantly drive off the track.

When he left, the silence felt heavier.

Rehab started two weeks later. It felt like humiliation disguised as progress.

The first time they sat me up without assistance, I almost passed out. My body felt foreign, like it was assembled wrongly. Like I was trapped under a skin I didn't know. My balance was off. My center of gravity felt wrong. My physical therapist- a woman named Lana- spoke in a calm, encouraging voice that made me want to scream.

"Baby steps... you'll get there!" she coaxed.

I didn't need baby steps. I needed to run- to fly again.

"You're doing great." she said.

I wasn't.

The truth was, it felt embarrassing. I was obsolete.

When I first saw the stump without bandages, I had to avert my eyes and turn away. The skin was scarred and swollen, my stitches raised and uneven as I ran my fingers across. My legs had once been my biggest tool: long, powerful, and conditioned for speed.

But now? They were a jarring reminder of what a careless accident could take away.

The first prosthetic model came a month late.

But it wasn't one of those sleek, lightweight blades I had seen on television before. It was bulky, and clinical. Meant for walking, not flying. Lana helped strap it in, adjusting the fit to my comfort, explaining how it would work.

"Stand up when you're ready." she said, a hopeful glint in her eyes.

I gripped the parallel bars that were set up for me, and pushed upwards. My arms trembled under my own weight. My knuckles turned white. The prosthetic felt like an unfamiliar object strapped to someone else's body.

I took one step. Pain jolted through the sensitive tissue, piercing and sharp under the pressure.

I gasped, wincing through my teeth.

“Breathe,” Lana reminded me.

I took another step.

It was the hardest thing I had ever done. Harder than pushing through the final lap of my race, when lactic acid burned in my legs, when my vision spotted and lungs scorched.

Because this time, there wasn't a finish line.

When I went back to school, it felt like I was walking into a museum gallery of my old life.

People stared. Not the fearful, competitive glances shared at the start line. No, this was different. Softer. Sympathetic. Conversations stopped when I passed, and whispers ensued shortly afterwards. Teachers smiled apologetically at me, like I had survived something miraculous.

I had.

But I didn't feel miraculous at all.

I felt broken. Worthless.

When I came home later that afternoon, my medals were still hanging on my wall. They chinked faintly from the breeze passing through my slightly ajar window. Cruel little memories.

First, I took one down. Then another. And another.

By the time my mom called me downstairs for dinner, all my medals, trophies, and awards were piled in a cardboard box I shoved in the back of my closet.

It was just too painful. I couldn't look at them without feeling phantom sensations- an itch of an ankle that didn't exist, the tightening of a calf I had felt too many times before.

Winter came early that year.

Snow lined the track like a blanket. I avoided going past it, but sometimes I couldn't help but sneak a glimpse. Lane four looked the same as always. Perfectly measured. Perfectly normal.

One afternoon on a frosty January day, Lana brought in a different prosthetic.

It was curved. Streamlined. A sturdy instrument of black carbon fiber shaped like a question mark.

My pulse quickened just at the sight of it.

“This is a running blade,” she said, smiling, “We don’t have to use it today, but I just thought you might like to see it.”

I stared at it, wide-eyed. It looked like opportunity, but also betrayal.

“Thanks,” I whispered, “B-But I can’t.”

“You don’t have to decide anything right now.” She patted my shoulder.

Yet the thought burrowed into my mind anyhow.

That night I couldn’t sleep. I tossed and turned in my bed. I kept seeing the clock flash 4:58.62. I kept hearing Coach’s voice on that day: Do you know what you just did?

I was the fastest. And then I was nothing.

The next week, I asked Lana to bring back the running blade.

Strapping into it felt different. It was lighter. Bouncier. When I stood, it was nearly natural.

“Just small movements,” Lana nudged, “Shift your weight.”

I did, and somehow it worked, like the blades were waiting for me.

“Try a hop!” Lana said.

Fear flared inside of me. I hadn’t left the ground since the accident. No impulsive movements. I took a deep breath, bent my knees- or what was left of them- and pushed.

For a moment, I was airborne. I was flying once again. Then I landed rather awkwardly, stumbling into the bars, exhilarated. But when I left the ground, something inside me clicked.

We started in the rehab gym. Nothing big at first. Ten steps. Then twenty. Then the perimeter of the room. Each session left my limbs aching and tender, but I had to relearn a rhythm.

Footstrike. Breathe. Repeat.

Except now, the footstrikes sounded different. More metallic and springy, but not bad. Different.

By the spring, Lana had convinced me to visit the track after hours. It was empty, the gallery was silent. I felt the brisk air caress my face.

I stood at the edge of lane four. My lane. My heart was pounding so hard, I thought I'd throw up.

"You don't need to run a mile Mara," Lana softly reassured, "You just have to start."

I nodded as I stepped onto the track. The surface felt the same under the blade- textured and familiar.

I started walking. Then a light jog. I ramped up the pace a little. The first few strides were clumsy and uneven. My balance felt weak, my arms overcompensated.

But then, there it was. The shift.

Where instinct and memory take over from effort. Where movement becomes natural, like I've known it forever. I guess I had.

The blade compressed and released with every stride, in a way that was new, but not worse.

Wind brushed against my face, ruffling my hair. I was running. Not like before, not as fast, but running.

Halfway through the home straight, tears blurred my vision. Not from grief or pain. It was something else. I wasn't untouchable anymore. I wasn't the girl gravity made exceptions for. I was the girl who had been pushed to the ground, and had gotten up with carbon fiber and stubbornness.

I came to a stop, chest heaving. Lana's eyes were shimmering and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

"I'm still slow." I said, smiling now.

"For now." she beamed.

I didn't break five minutes that day. I was nowhere close. But for the first time since October, my future didn't feel like a shut door. I had an opportunity.

By summer, I was training again. Carefully and methodically. Slowly building back the strength and speed I had.

The newspaper that had once called me "unstoppable" published a smaller piece: "Local Runner Returns to Track after Accident." It felt fragile, but also hopeful.

At our first track meet of the senior year season, I stood at the start line. The girls in my heat glanced at me. Not looks of fear or intimidation. Just curiosity.

The gun fired. I surged forward.

The race hurt in ways I hadn't imagined. My endurance was lacking, my turns were too wide, and my finish was missing the explosive kick it once had.

I crossed the line in 5:48.06. Dead last. The old me would've been devastated. The new me smiled. Because I had finished. Coach met me soon after my race. His eyes were bright, but not with pity this time.

"I could've pushed harder," I started, "I'm not where I was..."

"That's true," He said, panic rushing through my body, "You're tougher."

He smiled and I felt my muscles relax.

"With work, you could even qualify for Para Athletic nationals."

It settled into me. Different category. Same measurable rules. Effort still translated to outcome. It wouldn't be the clean lines I had mapped out. But perhaps straight lines were overrated.

That night, I pulled the shoebox out of my closet, and one by one, hung each of my awards up. Not as relics, but as proof that I had been fast, I had been strong, and I was still here.

I set my alarm for 5:30 AM the next morning.

There was work to be done.