RUNNING MY OWN RACE



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nosy crow

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First published in the UK in 2025 by Nosy Crow Ltd
Wheat Wharf, 27a Shad Thames,
London, SE1 2XZ, UK

Nosy Crow Eireann Ltd
44 Orchard Grove, Kenmare,
Co Kerry, V93 FY22, Ireland

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ISBN: 978 1 80513 373 5

A CIP catalogue record for this book will be available from the British Library.

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A. following rigorous ethical sourcing standards.
Typeset by Tiger Media

Papers used by Nosy Crow are made from wood grown in sustainable forests.



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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For my children who inspired me to start writing,
and my husband and my parents for their support.
A.E.

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Dad's favourite film is *Dead Poets Society*. Sure, he likes others, but when he wants to chill with me on the sofa at the weekend and there's no football on TV, it's almost guaranteed that he'll suggest we watch it. I'm not that bothered about the old movie but I love spending time with Dad, eating spicy plantain crisps and drinking Coke. So, even though half of the film goes over my head, I know some of the lines by heart. Like, "*Carpe diem*. Seize the day, boys, make your lives extraordinary." That's what the teacher says to the boys in the movie.

Dad whispered, "*Carpe diem,*" to me this morning as he hugged me tight before he left for work, his goatee brushing against my cheek. I know what he was getting at. He was telling me to seize the day, 'cause today is the day I start Nunford School.

The mega-expensive private school offers a full scholarship to a couple of state-school children every year starting in Year Seven. Mum wanted Abigail to do the scholarship exams when she was younger, but she refused. She and Mum argued about it for ages, but Abigail dug her heels in. She's always been able to stand up to Mum – which is amazing because I can't. Not at all!

"It's my life and I don't want to go to that snooty school," she'd say.

Mum would reply, "Who cares if it's snooty! You're Black. You need the best education you can get to compete in the real world."

But Abigail wouldn't budge, so Mum had no choice but to allow her to go to St Vincent, the local secondary. Now that Abigail is about to start sixth form, she and Mum are arguing again because

Mum wants her to go to university, but Abigail is having none of it. She says she wants to be earning ASAP! She has an offer for an engineering apprenticeship with a big company where she did a summer job this year. They've offered her a place as long as she gets good grades in her A levels. I'm sure she'll do that because she's clever … unlike me. Dad is proud of Abigail for going into engineering, but he barely says anything when Mum is going on and on. He once told me that he stays quiet so that Mum doesn't give him wahala. I get that. That's why I stay quiet too. And that's why I'm going to Nunford School today, even though I'm really not sure I'll like it there.

It was such a shock when I found out that I'd been given one of the scholarships. Sure, I sat the exam last year because Mum insisted on it. But when I was called for an interview with Mr Fortesque, the headteacher, it was an absolute nightmare until I mentioned I'd love to be a professional athlete.

"Doing what?" Mr Fortesque asked straight away, looking me dead in the eye.

"Running," I said quietly, wondering why he was so interested.

I don't even know why I brought it up. I've never talked about wanting to run professionally to anyone – not Abigail, Dad or Mum. I'm afraid they'll think it's silly and try to change my mind, especially Mum. She thinks running is something you do when you're playing. But Mr Fortesque seemed to take me seriously because next thing I knew, he'd called Mr Dunn, the Head of Sports, to come and meet me. I was taken to the school's athletics track, which blew my mind. I swear down, it was a mini stadium, right there in the school field! Mr Dunn gave me a spare Nunford PE kit that was way too baggy, and black spikes that were a little tight. He told me to run around the track twice.

When he blew his whistle, it felt weird running in a kit that wasn't my own and being watched by someone with a timer in his hand. But as I sped up, everything faded away apart from the happy, tingling feeling inside. I love running. When I run, something happens to me that I can't fully explain. It's like I'm

free and floating on air like … a super-fast superhero. It feels amazing! I could have run forever on the Nunford school track. It was so much better than any surface I'd run on before. I had to stop when Mr Dunn blew his whistle, and that's when he said something which, all this time later, still makes me smile.

"You are good. Very good, in fact."

I was ECSTATIC! It was the first time someone had said that to me about my running.

A couple of months after that, a letter from the school arrived offering me the scholarship. Dad looked at me with shiny eyes. He said, "You did it, son," and squeezed me tight. Abigail gave me a funny look and a nod – like I'd gone up in her estimation. Mum shouted, "Thank you, God!" She made sure she told all our friends and family the news.

Then the local paper heard about it and a journalist came to interview me in the flat with Mum and Dad, which was a bit nerve-wracking. The journalist told us that I was the first person from Exby to ever get a scholarship to Nunford School. When the article was published in the paper with a photograph and

everything, I became famous in Exby. Well, for a while anyway. Our friends, people from church and just random strangers would stop me in the street and shake my hand.

"You've made us proud," they would say.

"How?" I said to Mum. "I haven't even started the school yet! Why are they putting pressure on me?"

"Pressure? They're proud of you because you've got an opportunity that people around here don't dream of getting."

I let it go. I didn't want another Mum lecture on why it's important to want to become Somebody.

On Saturday, a few weeks later, when I was lounging on the sofa watching *Sports Roundup* on TV, Mum walked into the living room with a sheet of paper in her hand.

"Nunford School has sent more information about the scholarship," she said, standing in front of the TV with a frown on her face. "They say you must attend athletics club and try for the athletics team."

My heart skipped a beat. "Seriously?" I said, sitting up.

"Yes, it says here that it's a condition of your scholarship. Typical! Expecting Black children to only be good at sports."

I kept my face blank but inside I was doing my happy dance. *I must have got the scholarship because of my run!* Apart from my best mate, Charlie, I hadn't told anyone about my run at Nunford School. Not even when Mum fired questions at me when she came to pick me up that day. I wanted to enjoy the memory in peace without anyone ruining it for me.

"It also says you have to maintain good grades," said Mum. "That I agree with. It's the most important thing. Don't worry about the running."

I wasn't worried about the running. I was buzzing! When Mum left, I sat grinning, thinking Mr Dunn must really rate me. For a moment, I actually looked forward to going to Nunford School. Then I remembered that going there meant going to school without Charlie. We've been mates since he started Exby Primary in Year Three.

I know he wishes I was going to St Vincent with him. I mean, he hasn't come out and said it or anything.

But all summer, he's been banging on about how I'm going to change and become all posh. I've told him a bunch of times that I won't.

But even on Friday, as we played *Mario Kart* on his Nintendo Switch in him and his mum's flat, he said I won't want to know him once I have fancy new friends.

"Bruv," I said. "There's as much chance of that as there is of me getting tall like you."

That made him laugh. "Zero chance then."

"Exactly," I said.

That was three days ago. Today, I woke up to my stomach doing somersaults. I told Mum my tummy wasn't too good, but she insisted I eat the full English breakfast she had specially cooked for me to give me strength for my big day. I couldn't say no when she'd gone to so much trouble. But eating it was *so* not a good idea. My insides are now spinning around like a washing machine. I just pray I don't throw up. It wouldn't be a good look to have sick down my front when I start at Nunford.

* * *

Mum and I have just got on the jam-packed 304 bus to Nunford. Mum's leading the way, squeezing past people in the aisle as we look for somewhere to sit. Among the children on the bus, I can't see anyone else wearing the Nunford school uniform. The bus is full of chat. And a bit too warm. It's a good thing I left my new coat at home – I already have a jumper and a blazer on – I'd be boiling by now.

"Eh, Evelyn. Good morning."

The shrill voice belongs to a dark-skinned woman in the aisle seat by the exit door. I recognise her – she's one of Mum's regulars at her hair salon.

"Oh, Vida. How are you?"

I follow as Mum makes a beeline for her friend.

"I'm fine, by the grace of God."

"Kofi, say hello to Auntie Vida."

"Hello, Auntie," I say politely.

"Hello, Kofi. You're looking very handsome today."

I give a tight smile, though I know for a fact I look like a pint-sized man on his way to work. There's a silly hat that I'm supposed to wear as well but that's hidden in my school rucksack. If people see me in a

felt cap in Exby, they'll laugh their heads off! I'll put it on when I get there.

"You're right, Vida." Mum smiles, her eyes twinkling. "Baby K is looking dashing this morning."

There she goes again, calling me "Baby K" in public. Yes, even though I'm eleven and starting secondary school, Mum still sees me as her baby. It's sooo embarrassing. Already, because of my shorter-than-average height, low-cropped hair and round, dimpled face, people think I'm younger than my age. So Mum's nickname doesn't help! I did ask her once to stop calling me that, but when she said, "It's a term of endearment, Kofi," I just sighed and went quiet. I can't stand up to Mum. I hate it when she's upset or angry with me, so I just do what she wants me to do.

"It's lovely to see a young man presenting himself so well." Auntie Vida looks at Mum. "You've done such a good job with Kofi, Evelyn … and you're looking lovely too."

Mum smiles with her whole face. "Oh, thank you," she says in the high-pitched voice that comes out when she's pleased. She moves her body from side to

side to allow her friend to have a good look at her red skirt and matching lacy top. Mum is short and likes to squeeze herself into clothes that are a bit too small for her. Plus, you always know she's going somewhere special when she tries to make herself look taller by wearing high heels and having a high hairstyle. Today, she has on black high-heeled boots and has styled her straightened hair into a big beehive thing. I can smell the flowery perfume she normally wears to go to church. All of this to take me to my new school. She is sooo over the top!

"You must be off somewhere special," Auntie Vida says.

"Kofi is starting Year Seven at Nunford School today," Mum says proudly, making sure the other passengers hear her.

And they do. People start staring and whispering.

"Of course!" says Auntie Vida. "Eh, Kofi. Starting Nunford School today. You're putting Exby on the map."

Really?

"Congratulations, my sister." The tall Black man

standing next to Mum leans over. "I knew your son looked familiar. He was in the paper, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was," says Mum, smiling.

"Good on him. I wish you all the best, son," the man says, looking at me.

Feeling like I have to say something, I mumble, "Thank you."

"Thank you so much," says Mum, her smile even bigger than before.

Mum, Auntie Vida and the tall man carry on talking about the future I could have. I know going to Nunford School is a big deal, but do they have to go on and on about it?

Luckily, the man gets off at the next bus stop and I hear Auntie Vida say, "Are you working today, Evelyn? I was going to pass by after my shift to see if you could squeeze me in."

"I'll be working from late morning," replies Mum. "I've a few appointments booked in, but you're welcome to come after work, if you're happy to wait."

Mum will never turn away a client. It's a sign of how much this means to her that she isn't starting

work at her usual time of 8.30. Our living room in the flat doubles up as Mum's hair salon. From morning till evening, she has clients, mostly from our neighbourhood, coming in and out.

Dad could have brought me in his car but he had an early appointment today installing someone's boiler. He's a self-employed gas engineer.

"Emmanuel, you go to work. I'll take him," Mum had insisted.

Mum is still busy chatting, so I guess we're not looking for a place to sit any more. At least the other passengers are no longer looking at me and my stomach is calming down. I gaze out of the window at the Exby tower blocks and terraced houses as the bus moves from one stop to another. When I start to see swanky flats and large, fancy houses, I know we've reached Nunford. I've only been to Nunford five times and that includes the days I did the exam and the headmaster's interview. I swear, you must be loaded to live here. Everything looks so expensive. I bet everybody who lives here owns their own home.

I actually know four people who own their homes