

CHECK, CHECKMATE

by

Diana Taylor

If she stopped running she was as good as dead, she knew that for sure. What she wasn't sure of was how much longer she could keep up the pace. She had been running flat out for what seemed like an eternity and if she hadn't been absurdly preoccupied with one obscure examination after another she might have been able to judge not only the actual passage of this time but of her speed as well. Perhaps her mind took the liberty of engaging in distracting thoughts to keep her courage from falling prey to the sounds of her urgent running.

Every step brought with it not only distance from her pursuer but a seemingly complicated yet intricately thought out game plan for survival: calculate various strategies, compile options, chart a course. Keep a cool head was at the top of the list. Keep going was a close second.

She was grateful for the many years as a competitive long distance runner. In return for her diligent training she was rewarded with trophies then and stamina now. Nevertheless her heart was beginning to pound, its throbbing rapid succession of tha-thumps echoed in her ears. It seemed the rhythmic pound of her footfalls was coordinated with the tha-thumping and yet in the din of life and possibly death as it would be played out here; there was still room for wayward thoughts.

The image of Christmas and its entire accompanying gala popped into her head. Just like that. She thought about last year's Christmas tree and how she and her daughter Angel spent an entire Saturday immersed in their tradition of baking various confections and decorating their freshly cut Balsam tree; its fragrance mingling with that of cinnamon and vanilla making their entire house as comforting as a mother's bosom after a tricycle mishap. Tha-thump. Tha-thump.

She found it odd that she should be thinking about Christmas in August. Perhaps it was as a result of a conversation she had earlier in the week with a total stranger about how the major television networks choose to rerun Christmas shows in the summer. She

told the stranger of her holiday shopping tactic: start in late September so by the time Thanksgiving rolled around it was all done. This approach, she said, kept an otherwise pleasant experience from becoming a chore. Neither she nor the stranger could recall what got them started talking about Christmas. Tha-thump. Tha-thump. She promised herself a new pair of running shoes if she managed to survive her ordeal. It would be an early Christmas present to herself.

The trip to the beach was another gift to herself. Two weeks of sun and warm ocean water for a job well done in settling her father's affairs after his death. Her older brother was gone. Nobody knew where. A broken heart two years earlier left him depressed which started him to drinking and before they knew it, his telephone had been disconnected and his landlady told them he had paid her in full, including the six months back rent he had promised her. They hadn't heard from him since. She thought about him now and wondered if he was lonely. Tha-thump. Tha-thump.

Her sisters, both younger, had always assigned her the duties of life's executor and while she loved her father dearly, she wished just for once she didn't have to take care of the things that fell apart in their lives. But take care of things she did and she knew he would be proud. She didn't put much stock into the heaven and hell thing as she called it, but hoped that if her father was looking down over her now he'd give her a little push when she finally got tired of running.

Why, she wondered, wasn't her pursuer tired? Her fatiguing muscles and evaporating perspiration cooled by the evening breeze was evidence they had been running on the beach for a long time. They began evenly spaced on hard packed sand near the water's edge and then changed course up to the soft sand above the high tide mark when she was ready to make the mad dash for the unofficially marked entrance through the dunes that would bring her back up to the street and eventually to safety. Tha-thump. Tha-thump. A scrap of neon yellow kite tail eight inches in length had been tied, probably by a tourist, to a stalk of sea oats at the mouth of the dune. Tourists became frustrated at times by the monochromatic landscape and unrelenting sameness of the beach: sand, dunes, sea oats, sand, dunes, sea oats, and frequently marked their trails with shoes, driftwood or more commonly, the sparkling, lanyard like remnants of beach

playthings. The kite tail had been there all week and in fact she used it as a landmark of sorts earlier in the evening when giving directions to a lost couple.

She had come back down to the beach at this late hour to look at the heat lightening as it illuminated the watery horizon. Blasts of strobing white light 60 miles inland posed no threat but offered instead a stunning show occasionally tinting the night clouds with refracted light of orange and red. The hypnotic light combined with the always mesmerizing sound of the surf was so relaxing she didn't even see the dark figure running towards her until he was almost upon her. Tha-thump. Sometimes life does not provide time for a rational thought process, only for lightening quick ability to allow instinct to kick in. She turned around and ran for her life. He ran after her.

At first she could hear his panting, deep and rhythmic and her interpretation was one of evil, full of animal, determined to succeed in the hunt. But after a while she entered a zone that all distance runners experience; a feeling of being able to run forever. In competition she marveled at the ability of athletes to narrow the focus of their attention with razor sharp precision. This steely determination was what made the difference between those who won and those who did not. The zone enabled her to continue in her escape.

"Hey stop, I want to talk to you," he called out to her.

No way, she thought. Tha-thump. Tha-thump.

"Hey, don't you remember me? Come on, stop. I'm not going to hurt you."

Then why are you chasing me, she wondered.

Maybe he's not. Maybe he really does know me. Did he say we met before?

The quandary she found herself in was a repeat of an earlier dilemma in which she doubted herself. She saw herself at age ten playing chess with her father, her hand hovering briefly first over her knight then over the bishop unable to make a decision on which piece to move in a game that saw her success as nearly futile. In conscious thought came her indecision and circumvented her inherent skill. She began the process of second guessing her intuition and saw only her father's objectives in his chess moves.

Her reevaluation of his motives was based solely on her perspective. She took no pains to consider that his designs of play might be completely opposite of hers or at the

very least, quite unlike them. Agonizing over her indecision, for surely she would make the wrong choice leaving her at a severe disadvantage, she looked up at her father sitting across from her. With his arms folded on the edge of the table, she smiled at her and said, "Trust your instincts." She did, moved the Bishop and went on with the game.

The stranger called to her again. "Come on, stop. I just wanna talk. Don't be afraid."

His legs were longer but hers were faster allowing her to keep the distance between them. He couldn't reach her with his hands but he was trying his damndest with his words. Tha-thump.

"Don't you remember me? We met at the Black Pelican the other night."

His words were winded, they were distracting. She had indeed been at the upscale restaurant the other night. Who was there? Did she speak with anyone? A man? There had been a couple seated across the room. She noticed at the time the man was looking in her direction every time she turned to speak with the waitress. Once he even smiled at her when his companion had turned around for the purse slung over the back of a chair. People vacationing on the beach tended to be friendly, but she did not smile back and refused to look in his direction again. She was not interested in the man's motives or intentions. She wondered if the man at the restaurant was the same man running behind her. Things were getting muddled.

A flash of lightning brightened the night sky again allowing her to see the hole in the sand just in time to jump over it. The soft sand made it necessary to land properly, evenly, and sometimes then it wasn't always possible not to twist an ankle. The depressions left by footprints looked like a Chinese Checker board. It was one big hole surrounded by lots of little ones. Damn it, she thought, don't people know they're supposed to fill in those holes before they leave the beach? Beach goers dig holes for amusement, as a feat of accomplishment, but big holes are beach buggy suspension busters and human bone breakers. She herself had fallen into one years before she found this beach. That one was three feet deep and five feet in diameter and the jolt of that fall left her shocked and angry but not hurt. After that she knew to be aware of their existence. Experience was on her side this time, she cleared this relatively small child sized hole. Her

pursuer did not.

She heard the snap first then the sharp cry of pain. This was followed by groaning and a plea for help. “Help me,” he said. Two simple words, spoken in a conversational tone and at a decibel that while high was not extraordinary. Could she have possibly heard correctly? Her pursuer who just moments before had been chasing her was now asking her for help? Even with the increasing distance she heard him call for help again. This time his plea was followed by the word please, begging. “Help me. Please.”

There! To your left and up by 20 yards. See it? Tha-thump. Yes, she did see it, the kite tail blowing gently, fluttering in the night breeze. Only when she reached the entrance to the dunes did she ever so briefly turn around to see where her pursuer was. He was still there in the hole holding his ankle, in distorted prayer, rocking slightly. In a moment of stillness, two figures defined by their intentions as solitary, he looked up at her, a distant dark figure whose features she could not readily see. He met her stare and kept it but did not move.

Turning to follow the path home safely, she touched the yellow kite tail and realized a second wind had come to her. It would make the run home easier.

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Note: this piece was written on Ocracoke Island, North Carolina.