

THE FINISHING LINE

NAHREEN SALEHA SHAHADAT

"Drink this," says Harry, holding a blue Batorade bottle in front of my face. I swat it away and keep staring down at my feet, whilst I'm bent forwards with my hands resting on my knees. My shallow breaths seem to have synchronized with my quickening heartbeat. "Can I do this?" I ask myself, my eyes still fixated on the untied shoe-laces of my running shoes. By running shoes I mean the half-torn, almost-coming-apart pair of Bonverse shoes that I wear when I'm running.

There are people everywhere. Runners with their family or friends, maybe even both. It's far too easy to tell the runners apart from their well-wishers. The athletes are dressed in all white, the only things that's not white is the big bold black number glued right at the chest. Some of them did take the liberty to accessorise themselves with colourful headbands and colourful socks — some ankle high and some up to their knees. Anticipation can be detected in the faces of the tag-alongs, whereas on the runners' faces, a prominent look of dread sits rooted, which I'm sure is present on my face as well.

It's difficult to imagine that I'm finally here. The moment of truth. All those months of hard training and strict diets have finally come to an end. All that hard work behind me and now I'm contemplating whether I should actually do this or not. Should I really let my fear of what happens in the end shield me from running towards my goal? No, I can't. Months ago, I convinced myself to participate in this race, because we needed money and this race offered a lot. My brother and I both saw the opportunity and grabbed it, considering our passion for running. However, ever since Harry backed out, the pressure was on me to win. This is not about the money anymore. This is about me, and my ability

to make the whole town a witness of my talent.

"You need to drink if you want to keep up," says Harry, again holding the drink in front of my face, brining me out of my inner thoughts. "It'll start any minute now. Drink up!" he continues. I grab it from his hand and chug down, practically, the whole bottle. I stare directly at my worn pair of shoes, praying that they don't fail me. They've never failed me before and there's no reason for that to happen now, I think as I lace them up tightly. All runners are surrounded by their parents, who were either crying or praying. I'm glad that I brought Harry, who knows that people crying makes me uncomfortable. I stand up and stretch my back, which makes the most satisfying sound.

My nervousness suddenly comes flooding back as I notice that all the runners are warming up as well. This can only mean one thing — it's about to start.

Adrenaline rushes through each and every vein of my body and my heart pounds as if it might pierce through my chest. All my anxiety keeps increasing until it comes out in a liquid form out of my mouth. I rest my hands on my knees and try to control my breaths. "Get me another bottle of Batorade. Quick!" I order John and he, without a second thought, runs off to find another drink. The runners start heading out of the

locker room to take their place on the tracks.

Forcing myself to not think about it, I make my way out as well, mentally preparing myself to run the longest 500 meters of my life. As I take my first step on the tracks I hear hundreds and hundreds of people cheering for, what seems like, everyone. This soothes me somehow while I take my place on my designated track and wait for all the others to assemble.

We are now all in position with our palms firmly pressed onto the ground. I keep reciting my prayers, praying to win, praying to calm down the pounding of my heart. "ON YOUR MARKS," booms an unfamiliar voice. "GET," it's time. "SET," deeps breaths, I can do this. "GO!" and I'm off! I run. I run as my legs are about to fall off, my chest is about to explode. Yet I keep going, not looking at either side, keeping my gaze straight ahead.

I was done with the first lap. Then the second. The third and fourth come along as well. The moment of truth finally arrives. I give my all, screw my eyes shut. Soon enough I feel my chest graze a ribbon. Everyone cheers and out of nowhere Harry embraces me in the midst of a rain of multicoloured confetti. Unable to speak, I reciprocate his embrace and cherish the most amazing moment of my life here at the finishing line.