

**2nd Place  
High School 11-12**

**Running  
By Ben DeVries**

The couple in the opposite seat is bothering you. They're twenty-somethings and unaware of your presence. She's got her head on his chest. He's drumming his fingers on the top of her head and looking down the side of his face at her. They are murmuring—loudly enough that you can hear without catching any of the words.

You slump deeper into your seat and stare out the window. You wish they would shut up.

Beyond the smudged plastic of the window, Chicago's South Side is rolling past, the teeth of the Skyline growing in the distance. The train is on an elevated platform, and you are looking down at rooftops and one-way streets lined with parked cars. Few people are out because it's so cold; a draft seeps through the sealant at the bottom of the window. You push a gust of air from your lips and fog the pane. When it clears, you see your reflection beside a weather-streaked billboard with an ad in Spanish for Southwest Airlines:

*¿Quiere alejarse?*

*Sí.*

You venture another look at the two across from you. They've begun kissing. It is a tender, mostly silent affair, but other people in the car are noticing. You feel embarrassed for the couple—embarrassed that you are sitting so close to them—and that irritates you further.

The train bumps. She giggles. He pulls her back to his face.

The two disembark at the University of Chicago platform. By now the train is nearly full, and a taciturn black woman with gray hair and prematurely arthritic fingers takes the seat across from you. You check the time on your cell phone. 7:53. School started eight minutes ago.

At 8:08 the train groans to a halt inside Millennium Station, and you join the jostling exodus. Yellow lights stud the ceiling of the boarding platform like the buttons of a spine, illuminating the concrete floor in dusky circles. You follow the crowd to the ramp leading into the station proper. Blue tiles, stainless steel, and glass storefronts greet you. There is a Starbucks nearby. Coffee sounds good—Grande with a splash of creamer—but your funds are low, so you walk on.

After a visit to the restroom, you head aboveground where the station empties

onto Randolph. The wind is cold as it whips around the looming buildings. You pull your chin beneath the collar of your winter coat, puffing steam and wishing you thought to grab a hat before you left. To your right, traffic rumbles up and down Michigan Ave., and across the way you see Millennium Park, empty in the morning hours.

The stoplight at Michigan and Randolph changes, and you watch as a woman in a jacket and scarf hurries across the opposite side of the street, pushing a stroller.

“Little cold to be out with a kid,” you want to call after her, but a fresh gust steals your courage. Instead you imagine Carrie in the woman’s role, hunched against the cold, her bare hands clutching the top of the stroller, a diaper bag bouncing from one shoulder.

Mommy.

The image is strange, and you shake your head as you turn deeper into the city.

You don’t have any destination in mind, but it feels good to be outside and alone. You walk with your hands shoved into the pockets of your jeans and your chin pressed into your neck. People in trench coats and winter jackets brush past you, their faces flushed, and you realize you are walking slowly. You slant toward the curb, heedful of the lake of street slush that has accumulated along the road.

You wonder when they’ll figure out you ditched. Soon, probably—if not already. School has been going for nearly a half-hour. First period is a quarter of the way through. Phone calls will be made—perhaps are *being* made—after your whereabouts, and your parents won’t have an answer.

You dig your phone from your pocket. You wish suddenly that you left it at home as you initially planned. Any minute now “Mom Cell” or “Dad Cell” will buzz to life on that screen, and then what will you do?

You jam the cell back into your pocket. The last thing you want is another confrontation with your parents.

You turn north on Wabash. The El rattles and roars on the overhead tracks, a metallic dragon clawing its way along a tunnel. You wince at the noise until the train disappears. Nearby, a flock of pigeons huddles beneath an iron-grate staircase leading up to the platform, pecking at garbage and bobbing their heads. You aim a kick at them, and they scatter.

Your cell vibrates. Your stomach plunges into your bowels, but you growl and fish out your phone. It’s not your parents calling. It’s a text from Carrie.

where r u

For some reason this makes you feel awful. It is a simple question, yet in your mind, it transcends the constraints of those three words and grows enormous in size and suggestion. It bespeaks her need, your guilt. *Where are you?* And more than anything—more than anger at your parents, frustration with yourself, even irritation with Carrie for attempting to contact you—you feel the overwhelming weight of responsibility.

It terrifies you.

Pausing in the shelter of Popeyes' entryway, you tap a hasty "im fine," send it, and tuck your phone away. When she texts again, you don't reply.

You hear the distant clatter of the approaching El, and you veer right on Lake to avoid it, thinking vaguely about walking the Magnificent Mile. In your mind "where r u" pounds like the steel wheels of the train. You are having trouble concentrating. Behind you, a cabbie lays on the horn as he swerves to miss you jaywalking. You wave a hand after him and step onto the sidewalk.

Your thoughts tumble unwillingly to your parents' reaction to the pregnancy.

You are in your father's home office. Dark green walls. Bay window. A large, T-shaped desk with law-book laden shelves at the arms of the T. You are standing at one side of the desk, your eyes focused on a smudge on the desktop protector. One hand clutches the edge of the desk; the other is a fist by your side.

Across from you are your mother and father. Your mother is standing behind your father's cushy, leather executive chair, her arms folded across her small breasts. She is a thin-faced woman with dark, gently curling hair. Her skin is pale, and her lips have disappeared into a flat line.

Your father is the only one not standing. A book lies open on the desk, and his fingers are laced together on top of it. He is leaning forward in his chair, his sandy mustache complemented by the reddening of his face. His eyes are narrow behind his reading glasses.

No one speaks. The computer tower hums beside a black monitor where the Windows logo is flashing.

"She's pregnant?" your father says at last, as if your initial admission had not been enough.

"Yes, sir."

"Carrie?"

“Yes, sir.”

You risk a glance at him. He is removing his reading glasses. You see his hand tremor.

“How long?”

You swallow. Though you are the one standing, you feel minute. You see him as a criminal must see a judge—imperious, merciless, gavel poised.

“I don’t know,” you manage. “Two weeks? She just told me yesterday.”

“How long have you been screwing this girl behind our backs?”

You see your mother flinch at this. You flinch, too. He isn’t shouting yet, but he is one step removed from it. You have seen your father erupt before, and you fear this might be the first spluttering bursts of lava.

“Well?” he demands.

“I don’t know—I—”

“Bullshit!” Your father gains his feet in a rush. He is a big man and almost upsets the chair. Your mother catches it, steadies it, and then reaches to steady your father. He brushes her off and stalks to the other side of the desk.

“How long were you banging this girl before you finally knocked her up?”

He is shouting now—in your face and shouting. You can feel tears leaking from the corners of your eyes, smearing your vision. Burning.

“A year—two? I don’t—”

“Like hell you don’t know.” Your father looks like he wants to punch your lights out. His eyes are wild—piggish, almost. He is breathing fast and reeks of stale cigars.

You look to your mother, wondering if she is going to intervene, and see that she is wondering the same.

“Damn it.” Your father wheels around and stomps to his desk. You capitalize on the moment and take two steps back.

“Damn it all to hell. Dammit. Dammit. Dammit.” Two heavy fists settle on the desktop, and he leans toward you. “Two years. Can you believe it, Marlene? Two damn

years our boy's been rutting like an animal with this girl."

You can see the spittle leaping from his lips as he speaks, each word enunciated as if it were something foul he was trying to expel from his mouth. Your jaws clench.

"You don't understand," you say. "Don't talk like you understand when you don't."

"Oh-hoh-hoh." A vicious smile cracks his lips, and he steps lightly to the corner of the desk. "I understand perfectly well, son. Oh yes. The question is do you understand?"

You glare at him.

"You're planning on attending college next year," your father continues. "How are you going to do that now, *Papa*? You've got a kid—a woman who's going to depend on you. What are you going to do? Work full-time?" He snorts. "You're not going to get far without a college degree. You need clothes, diapers, baby formula. How are you going to afford that?"

He has rounded the desk again and is advancing on you. "Do you realize," he rumbles, "what you've done to yourself? Do you?" He prods your chest with a finger, and you stumble back. "Can you even begin to—begin to *comprehend* the fix that you've gotten yourself into? That you've gotten *us* into?"

He stares at you as if he expects an answer. His lips are pressed together; his eyeballs are bulging. His nostrils flare like a bull's.

You keep silent, grinding your teeth and glaring.

"Fine."

Your father retreats to his desk and slumps into his chair. After a moment's hesitation, your mother lays a hand on his shoulder. He doesn't seem to notice. His face is dull—sagging. He is nodding to himself, but he says nothing. He stares at nothing. Finally he leans his arms on the desk and cups his face in his hands.

On the wall behind you, a clock ticks minutes out of existence. The sound is impossibly huge.

"I don't know," your father says at last. He shakes his head upon the prop of his palms and spreads his fingers, so that he can see through the slats. He does not look at you.

“I don’t know. I don’t—I don’t know what I can say. What I can *do*. I just don’t know.” He sighs and lifts his hands from his face. “I don’t even trust myself to speak at the moment. I need time—time.”

He stands and, without looking at you, leaves the office.

You stare after him, uncertain of how to respond or even of what to think. Your breath is coming in shallow bursts, and you are suddenly aware that you are crying. You want to say something—anything—but you can’t. Words escape you. Thought escapes you. So you stare—humiliated.

The STOP hand at Michigan and Lake is blinking. Six seconds. Five. Four. Gentlemen, start your engines.

You bolt across the street, keeping an uneasy eye on the cars testing the stop line. They take off as you hit the curb, streaming steam from their exhaust pipes. You watch them for a moment, then re-pocket your hands and start north.

You are still amazed that in the fallout of Carrie’s pregnancy, your mother—not your father—hurt you the most. She did not rail and scream. She did not jab fingers into your chest. Rather, she placed a bomb inside your head and, wearing a calm, sad face, watched it go off.

She is bending over the oven when you walk into the kitchen. After your father’s eruption, you retreated to your bedroom and stayed there through lunch and dinner. But hunger eventually undermined your self-imposed exile, and you took station by the door, listening for the inevitable sounds of your father’s retiring into the bathroom to process his meal. Only when you heard them did you make your move—the prodigal son returning.

Your mother looks up as you enter. The ghost of a smile kisses her lips. She is baking chocolate chip cookies, and there is a rack of them cooling on the island. They smell wonderful.

“Help yourself,” she says.

You do not answer—you do not want to ruin her act of generosity by speaking. Aware of your unworthiness, you take a cookie and eat, watching as your mother slides a fresh tray of dough into the oven.

“You know we love you,” she says, straightening. “Your father and I.”

She is staring at you. You shift, leaning against the island, and allow your eyes to wander to the mahogany cabinets by the fridge. Slowly you nod.

“Good.”

You hear water running, and then your mother steps into your plane of vision, drying her hands with a towel.

“Hungry?”

“Yes,” you say, softly.

You sit at the table as your mother fixes a plate of leftovers for you. Your father is still in the bathroom, and you hope you can eat before he emerges.

Your mother returns and sets the plate in front of you.

“You aren’t still upset with him, are you?”

You lie and shake your head. Fajitas. Your stomach gurgles.

Your mother, looking relieved, smiles and nods and then takes the seat across from you. Warning flags go off in your head, and you ram half of a fajita into your mouth.

Your mother waits.

“So,” she says when you swallow, “now that this is all finally in the open, have you thought about what you are going to do?”

Boom. Detonated. Your next bite tastes like paste. Your mother is watching you with large, pitying eyes. She offers you a small smile to encourage you.

You wish you could remember how you responded. You must have said something, but your memory of the conversation is hazy. What are *you* going to do? Not us. Not Carrie. *You*.

where r u

Your phone buzzes to life.

*This is it*, you think.

It is. “Dad’s Cell” is calling, blinking like an SOS on your cell’s display. You let the phone vibrate in your hand, watching it with the same morbid fascination that you would extend to a train wreck in slow motion. Eventually it goes still.

You feel a grim satisfaction knowing that wherever they are, your parents are

having a heart attack.

Ahead of you is the Du Sable Bridge, which spans the Chicago River. You took Carrie here for her birthday last summer—bought two tickets for a Wendella boat ride on the lake. You had just started sleeping—

*rutting*

—together, but no one knew. And who cared? You adored each other. You remember riding the locks out to the lake, the boat's motor moaning softly, the water whispering against the hull. You had one arm wrapped around Carrie's shoulders and the other twisted around her arm, your fingers running through hers like laces on a shoe. The sun was bright; the air warm. You remember the brush of her lips against your ear when she spoke.

You push a gale of stale air from your nostrils and watch it dissolve into the cold.

Last summer seems an age ago.

You stop near the center of the bridge and lean against the railing. You look down. The water is murky—wintry and wrinkled and ugly—and you see a Styrofoam cup floating beside its plastic lid and red straw, rolling like a bobber with the waves.

You find yourself suddenly thinking of George Bailey in that movie your mother always makes you watch come Christmas. *It's a Wonderful Life*. George's life is in shambles, and he's through. He's had it. He's taking his ball and leaving. In this particular scene, snow is falling in big, fat flakes, and George is at a bridge of his own, bracing himself for the leap.

You almost laugh. You're no George. You wouldn't jump if someone put a gun to your head and told you to. You're a coward—a stupid, rutting coward. And now that you've been told to shovel the shit you made, you run—you run and keep running.

You exhale and look again at the water, at the cup bobbing beneath the bridge. George Bailey would never have made the mess you've made. And besides, when George almost gave up, he had Clarence to stop him. He had his guardian angel.

Where's your guardian angel? Who's going to stop you? All you've got is your Styrofoam cup, afloat but floundering in the water—and even as you watch, a wave overwhelms the cup, floods its open mouth, and drowns it.

In your pocket, your phone vibrates again. It's your mother. You shiver and pull your hands inside your coat sleeves. The phone goes quiet.



Thirty seconds later, she calls again, and instead of returning the phone to your pocket, you cradle it in your hands. With each new buzz, the noise of the city—the growling of car engines, the rush of the river, the murmur of passing voices—fades.

Your thoughts bend to Carrie—to the child, whom, not even a month in the womb, you are fleeing. You draw a shuddering breath. You’re doing no better than your parents. Worse, actually. They did not run from you. You did that yourself. And now you’re doing the same to your unborn child.

In your hand, your phone vibrates a third and then a fourth time. You think again of George Bailey and realize that Clarence never saved George. George’s friends saved George. George’s family saved George. All Clarence did was convince George to give them the chance.

He stopped George before he ran too far.

You look at your phone. On the fifth buzz, you pick up.

“Hey, Mom. I’m coming home.”

