

MY  
YEAR  
IN  
THE  
MIDDLE



LILA QUINTERO WEAVER

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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*To Paul, Jude, Benjamin, and Caitlin—  
with love and fierce devotion.*





★ 1 ★  
THANK YOU,  
MADELINE MANNING

Everybody in gym class is talking. We're like a chicken house with thirty biddies going *cheep-cheep-cheep* all at once. It's Monday, April 20, 1970—a fine, sunny afternoon in Red Grove, Alabama. We've just finished six weeks of volleyball, and everybody thinks we're coasting easy to the end of school.

But with three short blasts of her mighty whistle, Mrs. Underwood, who's feared and famous for push-up marathons and killer jump-rope sessions, calls for quiet.

"Y'all hush your yakking and listen up. We're doing something new today." She plants her feet in a wide stance and crosses those beefy arms of hers. You can feel it; she's about to drop a bomb. She's got that saucy look on her face that

you might see on a tomcat circling a canary's cage. "Girls, there's six weeks left till Field Day, when busloads of whip-persnappers from County show up for competitions. Time to get y'all good and ready." A murmur starts up. County is a bigger school than ours, and it's full of toughies, or so we hear. "That's why today you'll run the whole kit and caboodle." She waves her paw in the shape of the driveway we're standing on, which circles Red Grove Elementary *and* the high school. It's about a bazillion times farther than we've ever run before.

There's a second of stunned silence.

"Y'all got that or do you need me to spell it?"

The class erupts.

"All the way around? You can't be serious!"

"Indeed I am," she says.

"But that's too far!"

"Too far?" she hoots. "You lazy sheilas wouldn't know 'far' if it walked up on legs."

"But I'm not running at Field Day," one girl says. "I'm doing Hula-Hoops!"

"I'm doing horseshoes," somebody else says.

"Wheelbarrow races," another girl whines.

The biddies are all atwitter. Mrs. Underwood blasts the whistle and yells, "Shaddup!" Everybody gets quiet. She whips off her sunglasses and stares us down. She's solid

built. Her shorts come down to the tops of her muscular knees. She wears a floppy fisherman's hat without the fish lures and a safari-style shirt with pockets everywhere. She's a sight.

Then she speaks in a near-whisper we've come to dread. "You poor little babies. You have such a hard life. I feel so sorry for you." But you can tell she doesn't feel sorry for anybody, least of all a bunch of whiny sixth-grade girls.

I scan the crowd. Nearly every face is miserable—even Abigail Farrow's. Abigail has been my best friend since fifth grade, when she and her widowed father moved up here from Florida. "Lu," she whispers, her mouth in an upside-down U, "don't you hate this? And we're stuck with her for *six more years!*"

Funny thing is, I *don't* hate this. Normally, I'm scared to pieces of Mrs. Underwood, but right this minute something strange is brewing. The notion of running this driveway has my attention. This is big. This is real. Not like those easy-peasy kindergarten races we've done up to now.

One other girl is calm as a sheet of glass: Belinda Gresham. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her doing neck rolls and warm-ups, shaking one foot, then the other, back and forth.

Belinda's all right, from what little I know of her. Half the time she's hiding behind a book. The other half, she's cutting up with her friends, Angie and Willa. They're some of



the newish girls who transferred to Red Grove Elementary at the start of sixth grade. That's when public schools were finally integrated. Before that, we had no black students. Not a one. And neither did the high school. Plenty of white folks wish it had stayed that way, and here lately, some families have started sending their kids to a whites-only private school called East Lake Academy.

Mrs. Underwood runs a piece of chalk across the driveway, leaving behind a rough white mark. Three blasts of her whistle and we line up. We're at the west end of the driveway, behind the high-school gym that they let us elementary kids use and not too far from the baseball fields. A boys' PE class is out there. You can hear aluminum bats going *ping, ping* and voices calling out, "I got it! I got it!"

Mrs. Underwood backs out of the way and bellows, "Ready, ladies? On the count of three." You can feel everybody tense up. "One, two, three!" Her whistle blasts, and we take off like a wild herd stampeding down the pavement. A huge group of girls moves out at top speed, the way you would for a hundred-yard dash. Belinda is up there, tearing through to the front in no time.

But this is no hundred-yard dash. They're making a mistake going out so fast. Me, I start off at a steady rhythm. You've got to save something for the distance. I figured this

out when I was ten, from watching the 1968 Olympics. Although it took some doing to adjust the antenna on our dinky TV, Papá and I burned up hours huddled in front of the track-and-field events. We went cuckoo cheering for the Americans, even though the four of us Oliveras—Mamá, Papá, Marina, and I—are from Argentina. We moved up here when I was little.

Mamá tried her best to hush us. “¡Por favor, cállense!” She said that any minute the neighbors were going to complain, and what was she supposed to tell them? Papá said let them complain because we live in the United States now and we *are* Americans, so we should cheer for Americans, and do it at the top of our lungs. End of story.

There were good and plenty Americans to cheer for: javelin throwers, long jumpers, high jumpers, shot-putters, and pole-vaulters. But we went nutsiest for the track people. That Madeline Manning was something else. She ran the eight hundred meters for the United States, and I couldn't take my eyes off her. A little voice told me, “Study up, Lu.” The next day, I cut her picture out of the sports pages and stuck it in an old cigar box I keep under my bed.

Here's what I noticed: the Olympians ran with smooth, long strides and calm faces, like they had everything under control. Papá pointed out that they weren't flapping their

feet any old which way or sticking their elbows out like prissy hens. They knew when to cruise and when to turn on the jets. They saved something for the finish.

So out on the school driveway, it's like those Olympic runners are coaching me. Stay smooth. Move your feet quickly, but don't go at top speed sooner than you have to. And don't panic about whoever's far out in front because they'll run out of gas before long.

Why, thank you, Madeline Manning.

★ 2 ★  
BLUE BLAZES



One by one, I catch the girls in the middle of the pack. Most of their faces are red and blotchy. No wonder—they bolted like rabbits at the start, and now their tails are dragging.

During a long stretch of pavement with nobody but me running it, I hear yells coming from open windows. “Go, go, go!” Are they cheering for me? Most high schoolers treat us elementary squirts like we’re invisible. We have to use their cafeteria since we don’t have our own. We have to use their gym, including the stinky old locker room, since we don’t have that either. We’re right there under their noses, and they *still* don’t see us. On top of all that, I’m a runt. Turn me loose in the halls of Red Grove High School and I’m like a Chihuahua in a pack of Great Danes.

Right this minute, though, I feel tall. As I fly around the first two curves of the driveway, speed takes over my feet, and it seems like I might launch into the sky. I pass the band room. Tubas, trombones, drums, clarinets, and flutes all blare together like at football games, when every kid screams the fight song and the cheerleaders whip the crowd into a fever. In a flash, I dream up an oval track like the one at the Olympics, with stands full of people going bonkers. *Lu, Lu! Lu—Lu—Lu!* Their feet are like thunder on the bleachers. *Lu, Lu! Lu—Lu—Lu!* I'm pretty sure if this dream ever came true, it would make the sports pages of the *Birmingham Post-Herald*.

I catch up with some of the faster girls and can't help but notice they're spent. Two of them try to stay with me, eyes bulging and teeth clenched, but they've got no kick left. Too bad, bunnies—you're dust. Before long, I start gaining on the lead group. Connie Smith's long brown ponytail swishes back and forth like a windshield wiper. It's news to me that Connie can run this fast. She moved to town only last summer. Still, I manage to pass her, and as soon as I do, I've got a clear shot of Belinda, who's out in front with arms a-pumping to beat the band. She has no idea I'm reeling her in. When I run up alongside her, Belinda's cool-as-a-cat self does a double take, and I can just about read her mind:

*Whoa! This little runt?* She and I go neck and neck into the last curve.

Straddling the finish line, Mrs. Underwood squints over her sunglasses trying to make out who's leading. By this time, I'm ahead of Belinda by three or four strides. Off to my right, a few boys drag canvas bags full of baseball bats. They stop and watch. Never before have boys cared one whit what I do. My face burns like kingdom come, but I keep running. Faster. Now the chalk line is square in front of me. I watch my feet crossing it, but I don't break stride or slow down till I pass Mrs. Underwood. "Way to go, Olivera!" she hollers as I zoom by.

Belinda's right behind me. Soon, Connie and one of the black girls, Angie, come tearing around the curve, like a couple of long-legged fillies on a racetrack. The four of us are wrung as rags. Connie, who's never said much to me, flops down on the grass, while the rest of us walk in circles, hands on hips, catching our breath.

Angie sasses Belinda. "Girl, you let that peewee beat you?"

"Didn't let her!" Belinda says. "She's the real thing." My ears perk straight up. Nobody has ever called me "the real thing."

Connie rolls over on her stomach and pays us no mind.

Her chin's propped in her hands, and her eyes are locked in a squint. I can't tell if she's staring at the curve to see who's coming next or if she's studying the baseball fields. Every time a bat goes *ping*, sending a ball flying, you can hear the boys clamoring. Seems like Connie cares about *that* more than running.

I wander closer to Belinda, or maybe she wanders closer to me. All I know is that when our eyes meet, she gives me a nod. Respect. I nod back. She deserves respect, too.

"Dang, girl. Where'd you learn to fly?" she says.

"Beats me. That was the first time."

"Uh-uh. Quit joshing me." She fiddles with her ponytail, which she wears off to one side, like an arrow that says, *Here she is: Belinda!* The ponytail's held together with a fancy hickey-ma-doodle that matches her pink nail polish. My Lordy, she's stylish. Me, I'm nowhere close to fancy. But we're both fast, and if Mrs. Underwood puts us to this test again, Belinda's not going down easy.

By and by, the rest of the class arrives. The last group takes forever and a day, and by the time they shuffle around the bend, Mrs. Underwood's all out of patience. "Pick it up, slowpokes! My grandma can run faster than that in steel-toed army boots!" Belinda and I snicker. It's our first time laughing together. Everything's our first. First run, first nod, first talk. My scalp is tingly from all these firsts. Still, I can't

forget where I am and who's watching, because around here, black and white kids don't mix. No siree bob.

One girl stumbles to the finish and flops down on the grass, her sides heaving like a minnow out of water. Soon other girls join her on that patch of grass. Not me. It's itchy and crawling with fire ants and chiggers. Phyllis Hartley moans and groans that her lungs are about to explode. Ages ago in fourth grade, Phyllis and I were best friends, but we've barely spoken since Missy Parnell in her matchy outfits took over as Queen of the World. And now, just as somebody mentions that I won the race, my stomach churns when Phyllis blurts out, "What did she do *that* for?"

At long last, here comes Missy, who doesn't even pretend to run. She plops down on the curb next to Phyllis, whips her bouncy hair off her neck with one hand, and fans herself with the other. "I'm burning up, y'all. Flat burning up." Her face looks like an overripe tomato.

Phyllis grabs Missy's arm. "Can you believe Lu won? *Lu!*" That's when Missy shoots me the devil of a look. Mean green eyes in a tomato face.

Good gravy, Phyllis, why did you have to point that out to Missy? Might as well poke an ant pile with a stick. One place I never wanted to be was on Missy's bad side. Lord knows I've done all I could to stay out of it.

Mrs. Underwood says, "Listen up, ladies—I mean,



*babies*—I have good news, and I have bad news. Which do y'all want to hear first?"

Everybody says, "The bad news!"

"The good news is that y'all survived. After I give you the bad news, march yourselves into that locker room, get dressed, and skedaddle your lazy buns to your next class." She holds off until the whispers die down. "The bad news is that you're going to repeat this run tomorrow, the next day, the day after that . . ." An explosion of groans and screams drowns her out. I barely hear the end of Mrs. Underwood's spiel: "And we'll keep it up for these next six weeks until y'all get in shape for Field Day!"

The caterwauling near about busts my eardrums. "Every day?" Some girls look at me scandalized, like I should gnash my teeth, too. But I don't say a dadgum word because here's my secret: I'm happy, happier than anything's made me in a long while. Today I found out that running feels good and winning feels extra good. And now that I've gotten a taste of winning, I'm not going down easy either. No siree.

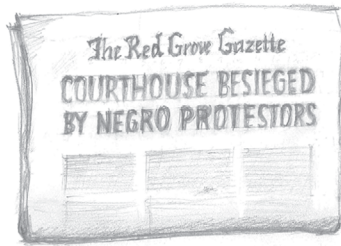
"Enough whining! Get back inside!" Mrs. Underwood yells. "Hustle, hustle, hustle."

I head for the locker room at a trot. My buddy Abigail slings her arm around my shoulder. "You little speed demon, you made us all look bad out there." Her face is the color of

a boiled lobster, but she's grinning. "Proud of you, but don't do it again!"

I'm about to speed off to my next class when Mrs. Underwood collars me. "Holy Toledo, Olivera. You can run like the blue blazes! Never saw that coming! Field Day's gonna be yours!" She grins so wide that her gold molars show.

I grin back. That makes two of us. I never saw it coming either. Never knew I had a motor in these little bird legs of mine.



★ 3 ★

SAM

Hurrying along the covered walkway that runs between RGHS and the elementary school, I set out for Miss Garrett's social studies class. I'm floating. "Field Day's gonna be yours," Mrs. Underwood said, and those words still ring in my ears.

I drop my books on the front desk of the middle row. Miss Garrett's classroom is like every other at our school. White kids sit on one side and black kids on the other. I'm one of the few middle-rowers who split the difference, since the four of us don't exactly belong to either group. Most of the white kids come from families that are against integration and don't want to sit anywhere near the black kids. The middle row isn't like that. Our moms and dads

believe in equal rights and all that good stuff, which makes us weirdos in some people's eyes. Being a foreigner and all, I'm already sort of weird—kind of like a sparrow thrown in with a bunch of blue jays.

The other kids in the middle row are Sam McCorkle, who sits right behind me; Abigail, who's behind Sam; and Paige, whose dad is a college professor and whose mom, Mrs. Donnelly, is our homeroom and language arts teacher.

Sam glances my way and starts fussing with his fountain pen. Could be he's practicing finger movements for the tuba. I hear he auditioned for the RGHS marching band. I've been noticing him lately. Ever since he got brand-new contact lenses last month, his eyes stay extra wide and he blinks tons more than normal. Turns out Sam's got gray eyes and long lashes. Hello. Never paid attention to his eyes before, and I've known him since *first grade*. Up to now, he's worn thick, old-fogy glasses that shrank his eyes down to BBs. Also, he used to keep his hair in that 1950s military cut that made you want to salute, but not exactly get friendly. Here lately, he's been looking like a regular boy with real eyes and longer hair—not past the collar, though, or Mr. Abrams, the principal, would raise h-e-double-hockey-sticks.

Sam's dad is Red Grove's Presbyterian minister. My sister calls him a hero. I don't remember much because I was only in first grade, but I know that black people in Alabama

were marching for their rights, and white people—especially our governor back then, George Wallace—wouldn't budge an inch for them. But the McCorkles were different. They always took the side of the black folks. Grown-ups didn't explain squat to us, so all we knew was that Sam was absent from school for weeks and got his lessons from a home tutor. Later, my sister told me why: because the McCorkles were getting telephoned death threats! They had to call the FBI and everything! Those people who made the phone calls must've figured on scaring Reverend McCorkle off, but he proved them flat wrong and kept right on being brave. Wowiee.



★4★  
THE ENVELOPE

A vase of pink carnations sits on Miss Garrett's desk, where she always keeps fresh flowers. "Class, please take out your election notebooks and open them to your last entry." I sneak a peek at Belinda, one row to my right. She's fanning herself with a sheet of cardboard, but I don't see a drop of sweat on her.

A half-dozen girls straggle in late. At the head of this line are Missy and Phyllis, my once and sometimes friend. My notebook's already open with yesterday's headline staring back at me: "Candidates to Address Public Friday on TV." Every day we show Miss Garrett that we're keeping up with the governor's primary election, which is two weeks

from tomorrow. Ex-governor George Wallace is trying like a house afire to snatch his old job back from the governor we have now, Albert Brewer.

While Miss Garrett moves along row by row, checking students' work, two-thirds of the class chatters away. I see where most of the jibber-jabber's coming from. In their far-right corner, Missy and Phyllis are having a jolly old time. If she were here, Marina would give me a talking-to because that's how sisters are. "Why do you care what they do? You don't belong with them. Get yourself a real friend, one with brains and gumption."

What does she think Abigail is, chopped liver? After Phyllis dropped me like a hot potato for Missy back in fourth grade, I had to twiddle my thumbs till Abigail moved up here so I could get myself one good, solid friend. But I still wish Phyllis would be nice to me again. Sure, I'd like to make Marina proud, so I mostly pretend not to give a plug nickel what Phyllis thinks about me, but it seems like my eyes have a mind of their own today.

A kid nicknamed Spider has his hand up. "Hey, Miss Garrett!" His uncle owns the black radio station in town, and every afternoon he lets Spider man the microphone for an hour, playing hits and taking special requests. You won't find a kid in the whole county, black or white, who doesn't recognize his voice. "Miss Garrett, how come you didn't say

anything when you looked at my notebook?" he says. Kids giggle. "You told Charles, 'very good.'"

Charles jumps in now. "Because mine's very good and yours ain't, pea brain."

Everybody hoots, but that's just Charles cutting up. Spider's no pea brain; he's the number-one math whiz in the sixth grade.

On the white side of the room, the girls in the corner are busy sorting and shuffling papers. Missy whispers in Phyllis's ear. Phyllis grabs a pen, scribbles, and hands a small stack of papers to Nick Flynn, the boy in front of her. He passes the stack to the next person. These must be the invitations for Phyllis's birthday party. My stomach does a cartwheel. I've been to every party of hers since first grade—surely she won't leave me out in the cold. But after the way she acted in today's gym class, who can say?

All the talking forces Miss Garrett to run for the light switch. She flips the lights off and on, off and on. "Quiiiiiiiiiet!"

I feel a tap on my shoulder. It's Sam. His eyes go blink-blink, and he silently hands me an envelope. I see he's got one, too. I stick mine in my book bag real quick before Miss Garrett can notice. You can't be too careful. Lots of teachers catch a note and make you stand up and read it aloud.

As Nick passes invitations to the next kid, a loose piece of



paper slides off his desk and skids across the floor, past my desk, to the black side of the room, where Charles snatches it up. “Oo-wee, looky here!” He reads it aloud: “Governor George Wallace Is Coming to Red Grove Friday, May First! Family-Friendly Gathering! Fun and Games for All Ages!” A few kids bust out laughing because Charles is using his fake grown-up voice.

Then Charles starts up a rhyme: “Georgie Porgy, puddin’ and pies. Kissin’ on babies and telling big lies.” Now nearly everybody laughs.

But Nick, whose dad is the head honcho of the local Wallace campaign, isn’t having it. “Better shut your fat mouth, if you know what’s good for you.”

“You shut *your* fat mouth,” Charles says, and shoves the flyer across the middle row, back in Nick’s direction.

“Boys, settle back down,” Miss Garrett says. She tells us to turn in our books to chapter twelve, page one hundred and thirty-five.

When the last bell of the day rings, Sam taps me on the shoulder again. “Hey, are you going to Phyllis’s party?”

Is my jaw unhinged? Silent Sam is speaking to me for the first time in all his born days! I doubt he’s ever spoken much to *any* girl. And since talking to boys is nothing *I* ever do on purpose, I just blurt, “Guess so,” and then I’ve got to haul it to the boarding zone to catch my bus.