

[Coach Jim White had built a running dynasty. His Mexican-American boys from the small, hardscrabble town of McFarland had won nine California state cross-country championships. But Coach White's final season before retiring proved to be the hardest, for him and for his unlikely team leader Javier Medina.]

Running for Their Lives

Gary Smith

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There was silence when the footrace ended. Then Ayon threw his arms around the coach's wife and cried, "Why did God do this? I don't know why God did this!" and the boys in red and white each staggered off alone to cry.

They had failed the most successful coach in California schoolboy history. They'd failed the elders who'd walked at their heels to the starting line, reminding them that they had to win the state championship for Mr. White. They'd fallen apart on the old man's last day as a coach, they'd spit on his dynasty and ministry both. Sixth place.

Mr. White's wife went to dry their tears. But then she and the elders began crying too, and it was hopeless. No high school sports program in California had ever done what theirs had—won nine state titles—but it had been this team's duty to send Mr. White into the sunset with the untouchable number, the fitting number, the perfect number: 10.

One by one, that autumn day a year and a half ago, the Mexican-American boys awaited their chance to speak to the white man alone. To say, "I'm sorry, Blanco. I'm sorry for letting you down."

Except one.

Eight months passed. Evening fell on the heat-slugged little town. Laundry sagged from plastic lines like skin from the brown dogs' ribs. Workers, home from a long day of picking grapes, sat inside their stucco box houses as if stoned by the sun. Chickens in their front yards gave up pecking at the bare earth. Not a peep came through the doors of El Cha Cha Cha.

Wait. Something just stirred on the southwest edge of town. A plume of dust, out in the almond groves. A herd of brown boys kicking up powder on a dirt road.

A bicycle nipped at their heels. It accelerated if they slackened and made them raise dust again. It moved up onto their flank to protect them against the farm dogs' fangs. It dropped back to round up stragglers. Jim White thought he had passed the torch to his faithful assistant, Amador Ayon, thought he had retired and begun to fade away. But his town and his wife and his gut hadn't let him, so here he was at 62, weeks before the 2003-04 school year and cross-country season began, sheepdogging his flock through 100[degrees] heat, chasing state title number 10. Again.

He rose from the seat of the bike and pumped harder, exchanging nods and words as he passed Julio and Baltazar and Octavio and Steven, both Tonys and both Juans, all the

boys who'd hoped with all their hearts that the sun wouldn't set on them, that the town's patriarch wouldn't retire during their four years at McFarland High . . . that they wouldn't end up sitting inside those stucco box houses at night for the rest of their lives, dazed by fieldwork and sun.

What were the odds that Ayon or anyone else could take over and keep this magic dust cloud moving? What were the odds that in the annals of California high school sports—all the years chocked with big-city phenoms and rugged valley boys and wealthy suburban programs—the greatest dynasty would be produced by a band of 5 1/2-foot Mexican-Americans at a little high school in a town with no traffic light or movie theater, one of the poorest communities in America? That year after year a blue-eyed man on a bicycle could compel another bunch of teenage campesinos to run eight miles across the fields and orchards where they'd already worked all day harvesting oranges and grapes and almonds and peaches and plums? Every evening? In their off-season?

Mr. White tucked his bike behind the front-runner, the fastest one, the unlikeliest leader he'd ever had. The boy who wished that Mr. White had just packed up and left to live his last years in his cabin an hour away in the Sierra Mountains, as he'd planned.

The man and the boy kept pumping their knees. They were both striving for more than number 10, both straining against all the invisible strings that bound them to McFarland. Both struggling to find their way out.

Mr. White drew closer. "Good work, Javi," he murmured.

Javier Medina didn't lift his eyes. He turned his shoulder to his town's legend.

It didn't seem like a hard town to leave. Most people left before realizing they'd ever entered, barreling through the Central Valley three hours north of Los Angeles along Highway 99, a strip of asphalt that separated McFarland's poor West Side from its poorer East Side. The white descendants of the Dust Bowl refugees who had founded the town had no trouble abandoning it in the 1960s and '70s to Mexican immigrants weary of wandering from town to town, crop to crop. McFarland's movie theater became a mortuary, its newspaper was long gone, and all the bars but El Cha Cha Cha were boarded up. The town had two places to go to jail and nine places to go to eat. The population was 9,600 if you didn't count a couple of thousand illegals and the 1,100 behind bars. McFarland was renowned chiefly for its high incidence of cancer, which had afflicted one of Mr. White's nephews and more than 20 other children between the mid-'70s and mid-'90s and scared visiting teams into bringing their own water.

Mr. White loved McFarland.

He arrived in 1964 fresh from college in L.A., took a fifth-grade teaching job and jumped in with both feet, making sure his yard, too, had chickens and rabbits scratching at it. He wanted to get to know people. He wanted small. He came from a family of missionaries but had fallen in love with sports: Here was his chance to merge duty with passion. He began coaching every school and rec team he could, basketball and baseball and football and track, and when little boys knocked on his front door asking if he'd come out to play

tag or ball, he'd say sure.

So what if the town turned brown before his very eyes? In college he'd chosen a roommate who was half Mexican, half Native American. So what if Mr. White had never been a runner? The local runts he wanted to coach in cross-country hadn't a prayer on a basketball court or a football field—endurance and slow-twitch muscles were their genetic gifts—and for all his compassion, he needed to win. So what if he had to wait 17 years to get a coaching job at the high school? He'd grown up in a dozen houses in Stockton, moving as swiftly as his father could build a new one and sell the old, and he longed for roots the same way that the weary migrants around him did. Four decades after Jim and Cheryl White arrived in McFarland, the town would be 99.9% Mexican, and that—as their three long-since-departed daughters like to say—was only because Mr. and Mrs. White stayed.

Blanco, his runners often called him. English was their second language, one that bedeviled them in the classroom and kept most of them out of college. Most went to the fields when they reached puberty, stooping and snipping, climbing and crawling and duckwalking through irrigation puddles to supplement their parents' pitiful wages. No one could figure it out, how the runners with the shortest legs and the grimmest lives began winning everything once Blanco took over their program, in 1980. He'd joke that it was the town's notorious water or the beans that McFarland's mamas served. He persuaded the boys that it was the "voodoo juice" oil he'd give them before races to rub on their aching backs and legs, the cleansing teas and the shakes full of complex carbohydrates and the gel capsules full of vitamin E and bee pollen that he'd dole out. But the secret was his vast investment of time and heart.

He'd grip the rawhide hands of the boys' fathers and look in their eyes, convince them that something beyond food, clothing and shelter mattered, that this silly Anglo notion of high school athletics had meaning. He'd fetch their sons in a battered '59 pickup that had been a forest ranger's truck, two lucky lads up front drinking in his stories and 16 crammed in the back where they could keep an eye on the road through the rotting floorboards. He'd haul them into the foothills to run the orange groves. He'd take them to collect old bottles or newspapers, to sell tamales, to hoe cotton fields—Mexican golf, the locals called it—raising funds so they could compete all across California.

He'd take them where their own fathers hadn't the energy or money to take them—bowling lanes and Putt-Putt courses and movie theaters in Bakersfield, a half hour away—and farther, much farther, to do things many Mexican boys in McFarland had never done. To set eyes on the ocean, to stay in a hotel, to sleep under a white man's roof and sing Ging Gang Goolie on a 12-hour road trip. To camp at Yosemite and run five miles at sunrise to fish for trout at a lake, then run five back to cook it and roast marshmallows over a fire. To fly in an airplane, as the program grew, to run in New York City and Charlotte, even Germany and China. To see that the flat farmland starting at the edge of town didn't go forever, needn't swallow them if they could just master themselves, just do the simplest, hardest thing: lay one sneaker in front of the other again and again.

He never had a son. He had hundreds of sons. He'd take his runners to the doctor, visit their mothers in hospitals and their brothers in jails. He'd help them study, drive them to college, pay their tuition, feed and clothe them, go to court with them and to the wall for them even when, long after graduation, they strayed off the path. "I need you to come back and run with us, buddy," he'd tell fleshy 25-year-olds through prison bars. Cheryl, who'd grown up watching her mother, a minister's wife, do such things for her husband's Church of Christ congregations, showered the boys with homemade cookies and hugs, heart-to-heart lunches and handwritten notes signed "Mrs. Coach." Mr. White, following the calling of his cousins and uncles, had served as a minister in his church in McFarland; his sister and an uncle had served missions overseas: He knew no other way to run a team.

He rarely raised his voice. He'd stumbled upon the sorcerer's stone of coaching: Give so much of yourself that your boys can't bear to let you down. They won the first state cross-country championship held in California, in 1987, and their town gussied them up in foam antlers and had them pull Mr. White through the streets, scrunched in a red Flyer wagon and wearing a Santa hat. They won 22 of 24 league titles and 15 sectional championships, beating schools with enrollments seven times as large as theirs. The first 15 years that California held championships, they won nine, all in Divisions III and IV, but some years they likely would've taken the whole tamale against the megaschools in Divisions I and II as well, if only they'd gotten the chance. They became McFarland's treasure, their ranks swelling each year as graduates circled back to push them and chide them and mentor them, to chorus Mr. White's wisdom to the next wave. They became so much like a family that one day even Javier Medina decided that he wanted in.

Something takes a part of me. Something lost and never seen. Every time I start to believe, Something's raped and taken from me.

[LYRICS FROM "FREAK ON A LEASH" BY JONATHAN DAVIS OF KORN]

Javier lay in his bedroom, listening to Korn howl the lyrics to "Freak on a Leash." He was in eighth grade. It was 1999. He was teetering. His sister, Corina, had already tumbled into drugs and darkness, tattooing her wrists with SURENAS LOCAS—Crazy Southerners, the female subset of a McFarland gang. Their father kept vanishing, into jail for half a year for hitting Corina, or God knows where for months on end after drinking and raging and being thrown out of the house by Javi's mother.

Javi cranked the music—Sometimes I cannot take this place/Sometimes it's my life I can't taste/Sometimes I cannot feel my face—and put on his game face. It wasn't easy. His eyelashes were too long, his eyes too soulful, his stack of books too high for punkhood. He yanked on his blue Korn T-shirt, grabbed the notebook that he'd driven a screw into and headed to school, late again.

He had tried to honor his favorite anarchy-rock band by ducking into the locker room during Mr. White's gym class at McFarland Middle School and sandpapering KORN onto the brand-new lockers. It had nearly gotten him expelled and—as he tried to talk his way out of it—into perhaps deeper trouble still. "I'm going to run for Mr. White one day," he'd blurted to the startled vice principal, one of White's assistant coaches and former runners, David Diaz.

Even Mr. White snorted when he heard that one. Javi? The smart aleck who'd flunked Mr. White's phys-ed class because he refused to suit up, suddenly grunting out 10 half-mile repeats straight uphill at a 2:45 clip? Yeah, right. The sulker with the 0.9 grade-point average in seventh grade, the school's Snail Award winner for most days tardy, setting his alarm clock for 6 a.m. to run along the irrigation canals? Sure. The younger brother of Salvador Jr., who had smart-mouthed and drag-assed his way through high school while running for Blanco just a few years before? Mr. White's life's work was retrieval, salvage, salvation and so, of course, he'd give Javi a shot, but . . .

Javi went home, lay in bed and, for the third time, read *Banner in the Sky*, a book about a fatherless boy who climbs a mountain that no one believed could be climbed. Javi went outside as darkness fell and lay in the back of his father's pickup truck, staring at the sky while his dad sat in a plastic chair nearby and drank beer in silence.

They couldn't talk. Salvador Sr. spoke Spanish, insistent on remaining Mexican. Javi spoke English, determined to be American. Each was too stubborn to speak the words he knew in the other's tongue. When Salvador, a third-grade dropout who didn't read or write, saw his son disappear behind another book, he'd bark, "Go out and play! You'll hurt your eyes!" He had smuggled himself into the U.S. twice as a teenager, the first time beneath the hood of a pickup truck, the second, for keeps, in a footrace with the border patrol, one of 25 desperate men who darted across the desert. Only two had made it. He believed in work, not words, but he wouldn't let Javi work with him in the grape or rose fields, denied him his share of McFarland's bitter drink. "You're too soft," Salvador said. On summer mornings Javi would watch his older brother and the other boys in town climb into pickups and head off for the fields with their fathers; then he'd return to his books and his bedroom.

Salvador crushed his beer can and rattled it into the bucket of empties. Before the snap of the day's first pop-top, he'd vacuum and mop the house and wash every dirty dish, and when he went on errands he couldn't pass a stranger stranded on the road without stopping to help. That was the man Javi loved. Some days he would hide his father's beers in a kitchen cabinet. Others, he was so hungry for approval that he'd be the first to his feet to fetch Dad another cold one. Korn was correct: Life was pathetically mucked up.

Salvador sipped and stabbed a callused finger at the stars. "Los Siete Osos," he murmured. The Seven Bears. Javi nodded. Salvador pointed and murmured again. "El Camino de San Diego." The Road to San Diego—the swath of stars that Mexicans on foot followed at night on their way to San Diego, America, hope. Javi nodded again. Those constellations, these moments beneath the night sky, were what he and his father had. When adults asked what he'd like to be when he grew up, Javi had begun to say the most astonishing thing for a McFarland boy: an astronomer.

But how could he reach the stars from a town like his? Just one man there had stretched that far: the tall, handsome white man bicycling down the road, herding his family every single day. Something about Mr. White's steadiness, his resolute pursuit of the highest goals, struck Javi even as he defied the man in gym class. Maybe, too, it was the twinkle

in Blanco's eyes as he mangled Spanish, the silly dances he'd do and the pranks he'd play, smuggling cookies into a teacher's purse and then clucking in disbelief over her gluttony, or crooning "Jose can you see . . . any bedbugs on me?" to every Jose in town. Somehow, Blanco was both a remorseless taskmaster and a big, goofy kid—and one of the few gringo teachers who didn't commute from Bakersfield, who'd lived among McFarland's Mexicans for nearly four decades, showing them the surest way out of town . . . but never taking it.

Javi showed up one day at a rec department cross-country practice directed by one of Mr. White's former runners, a proving ground for prospects. I'm going to show Mr. White something he won't believe, Javi told himself. He gasped and quit running and had to walk to the finish. But he came back for the next practice and the next, and by the end of eighth grade—too soft, huh?—he had run faster than anyone believed a boy with a chip on his shoulder could: a 4:55 mile!

He joined the fleet trying to stay in front of Mr. White's front tire. He muttered an obscenity during a team outing, and Mrs. White walked him off alone and said, "Oh, no, no, no, not in this family." He apologized, and his life began to fall into a groove. "Running bolts my head on," he'd explain. "I know who I am by running. It puts me into reality, so I don't float off into space. I forget my problems. I say, 'I run for McFarland,' and people are like, 'Wowww!' Deep down I want people to think of me as part of something, even though I pretend that none of that matters. Jeez, man, without this program, I'd have no personality, I'd be . . . nothing."

He made his first true friends, a brotherhood of sweat and pain with runners Juan Gonzalez and Steven Cavazos. He loved bumping fists before and after each practice with his teammates and all of Mr. White's former runners, los veteranos who still trained with the team and became a battalion of big brothers to Javi. He loved arriving at meets on the bus and watching the other schools' runners' heads swivel and their eyes cloud and lips move: McFarland's here. He loved closing ranks for the team prayer and feeling his stomach knot at the sight of taller, wealthier boys on the starting line. "They're all white," a new kid on the team would sometimes say, and Mr. White would reply, "Yep . . . and they're all bigger. But I guarantee you they aren't as tough and don't work as hard as you do. Let's go take them down."

Mr. White was right. State title number 8 came in Javi's freshman year, when he ran with the frosh-soph team. Omniscient wasn't a word he'd toss around with the guys, but that was the word, he decided, for Mr. White. Just follow him, Javi told himself, and good things will happen. He followed Mr. White across the country, felt the thunder of Niagara Falls on a running trip, looked down on a cloud from atop the Golden Gate Bridge, saw water at Lake Tahoe that was bluer than any in a dream . . . and began to fix his eyes on college somewhere else. He scratched his way to No. 5 varsity runner in his sophomore year on a team that, midway through the season, clawed all the way to the No. 1 ranking in the nation among small schools and to No. 4 overall. Anyone who came to the races could see that Javi wasn't too soft to work in the fields, could see his grit as he rubbed out opponents in the last quarter mile . . . anyone at all. But his father never came.

"Oh, how your father brags of your achievements to his relatives," Javi's mother, Sylvia, would tell her son. But never a word from Salvador to Javi, even when his sophomore season ended with the ultimate ascent, up the ladder with his teammates as their names were painted in white letters on the ninth black silhouette of California on the school gym's outer wall, the display that opponents gaped at when they visited cross-country's Mecca.

Of course, the Snail still crept in late for some practices, skipped some and moped through others. Javi still was a boy missing something, one who could get lost searching for it in the spaces inside his head. He remembered to get his eyebrow and ear pierced and his hair dyed blond, but he forgot to bring his running gear to a meet. An excellent idea, he thought it was, to sign the Whites' guest book JAVI BAD A** in gangsta graffiti bubble lettering. Then he had to Wite-Out the words to remove the red from Mr. and Mrs. White's eyes. That was Javi. Ten years from now, a veterano wondered aloud, would Javi be in astrophysics . . . or in jail?

Mr. White was the weight that could tip the balance. Javi would do almost anything to please that man. He'd set up tables and sell concessions at rec department races to raise funds for the McFarland program, slice fruit for the peewee runners and act as their rabbit to improve their times. His grade-point average rocketed to 3.5 his first semester in high school, then to 4.0, then 4.17. He affixed the watch Mr. White gave him to his bedroom wall—he couldn't risk wearing it on his wrist. He taped Mr. White's photograph amid the pictures of planets that orbited his room.

One day late in his sophomore year, the planets moved, the solar system shifted. Javi heard the rumor: Mr. White's leaving.

How do you leave a place where you've taught and coached and loved for 38 years? How do you tell a couple of dozen Mexican boys that it's time to give your children's children what you didn't have time to give your own children: you. How do you tell teenagers what you owe your wife after four decades of flying out the door at dawn and trudging back in as she falls asleep? How do you explain to field hands' sons that you've worked so many years that your annual retirement pay would total 96% of what you'd get if you kept working . . . that you're human, not a saint?

You don't. You don't explain. You don't call a team meeting and make a big wet fuss over this being your last year and how much they've all meant to you. Not when you're Mr. White, and your life leans on actions rather than words. Not when the words might stick in your throat. You just take aside your trusty disciple Ayon and tell him that you're going to start pulling back and letting him emerge as the leader during this transition year, because that's your goal: to pass the torch without extinguishing the flame.

The rumor festered. The family gathered, as always, at Mr. White's home for their evening runs that summer of 2002. Javi peered at the dark windows of Blanco's weather-beaten stucco box house. Where was he? Off in Texas or Long Beach visiting his daughters, Ayon would say. Off at his new cabin up in the mountains, building the wraparound deck of his wife's dreams. He'll be back to coach this year, don't worry about what happens after that, and c'mon, now, guys, let's pick it up. Javi slogged toward the

almond groves. Who had sat all the boys down beneath the orange trees and, in the dulcet voice of a pastor, reminded them over and over how important it was, every day, to show up? Who had said he'd always be there for them?

Every time I start to believe

Somehow it didn't seem so urgent anymore to throw one foot in front of the other. Somehow, as summer ground on and no one knew when to expect the coach, it no longer seemed imperative to show up. Mr. White would act as if nothing was wrong, no big deal, when he did appear, full of pleasantries and wisecracks—as unaware of the effect on Javi of his looming departure, it seemed, as Javi's dad had appeared to be all those times he'd left.

But Javi couldn't confront Mr. White any more than he could his father, and so he began to do things that seemed to have nothing to do with the hurt. He began staying up late, emptying a few beer cans of his own and drifting into practice late because he was walking a girl home from school, kissing off Mr. White's age-old warning that nothing would pull a butterfly back to the caterpillar pile faster than a girlfriend. He didn't need Mr. White's voodoo juice before races anymore. He'd hear the other runners beg Mr. White to change his mind about retiring, but Javi wouldn't do it. If someone wants to leave, he kept thinking, then I don't need him. It wasn't easy being the one who saw through the armor of the town's white knight. But Javi had gone it alone before, and dammit, his second father wasn't going to lay a finger on the wound left by his first.

The Whites felt him slipping through their fingers but kept giving him another chance. They were old pros at this, at rescuing runners who'd dropped out or impregnated girlfriends or slept on plastic lounge chairs because their parents couldn't afford a bed. But Javi was different from the other lost boys, more intelligent, more sensitive, more perplexing . . . always just out of Mr. White's reach. His long eyelashes would flutter and his face contort for a half minute before he'd reply to the simplest query, agonizing over how much to drop his guard.

Mrs. White took him out to lunch for one of her heart-to-hearts, but only one heart was put on the table. Mr. White went to Javi's house to talk to Javi's father but couldn't penetrate the beer and language barriers. He tried teasing Javi back into the fold, then tightening the screws. "Look, everyone, we have a new kid running with us today," he'd say when Javi showed up after a few days' absence. "Got your brain on today, Javi?" None of it worked, none of it could, because Javi was waiting for the man to show his feelings, not his needle.

More than for their town or their school, the boys had always run for Mr. White, a tie so strong that it bordered on dependency. Now that rope began to unravel. The team split into cliques. The boys yo-yoed. One day they would speed up, at los veteranos' insistence: It was Blanco's final year! The next they'd crawl: It was Blanco's final year. Yet by sheer force of habit McFarland ran well enough, as the state championships approached, to be favored to win number 10—and a fourth straight crown.

Javi, who had become the team's No. 2 runner, could see it in los veteranos' eyes: He'd be

marked in his town forever if he failed. It jabbed at his sleep like the bedsprings coming through his mattress. The day before the state meet, Mr. White opened *The Bakersfield Californian's* sports page and shuddered. What?

"We realize that second place is just not going to happen," said Javi in the article. "We're going to win, and that's it. We're not competing against other teams. We're competing against ourselves and trying to get a personal record." Javi had turned his terror inside out.

Ayon pulled the boy aside, aghast. "No McFarland runner," he growled, "has ever been as blunt as you." Silence filled the team van on the ride to Fresno that gloomy Saturday. Thirty former McFarland runners awaited the boys at Woodward Park, reminding them of their obligation to Blanco even as they braced at the starting line. The gun sounded, and the alumni took off as if it were their race, crunching through the dead leaves outside the ropes to keep a bead on the boys.

It was too much cargo to bear. Javi crossed the line in 16:41, 23 seconds slower than his best time on the five-kilometer course he'd run so many times. McFarland's top five runners ran their worst races of the year, and the team's sixth-place finish was its worst ever in a state meet. The boys were still weeping into their mashed potatoes at a buffet an hour later, still sobbing when they stumbled out of the van back in McFarland. Javi went straight to his bedroom and wouldn't come out.

The boys walked into the team banquet two months later as if they weren't good enough for the tuxedos Mr. White had rented for them. Blanco apologized to the town, took the blame for what happened and couldn't beat his tears to the end of his farewell speech. Javi didn't cry, as his mother and the others did. Javi never saw Mr. White give his speech. He'd turned his chair to face the other way.

Sixth place sat in Mr. White's gut like a pit from one of his backyard nectarines. Retirement tasted like the pesticide on a summer breeze. Instead of pride over all the migrants' sons he'd transformed into teachers and administrators and coaches, uneasiness settled over him as he gazed at the mementos of his coaching career. All his life he'd played to win, even if it meant bumping the Ping-Pong table in mid-rally, pinning down an opponent's arm as he went up for a rebound or wreaking havoc as a flag football coach by instructing one of his players to almost leave the field during a mass substitution, then streak up the sideline unnoticed to snag a touchdown pass.

What, he kept asking himself, had gone so wrong on his final day? Forty-two years earlier his varsity basketball coach had burned him at Magic Valley Christian College in Idaho, banishing him to the jayvee for his defiance of a decree that students attend no other church but the one on campus. He'd never do such a thing when he became a coach, he'd vowed—he'd bend over backward to be fair to his kids. But maybe, in his final year, he'd violated his golden rule. Maybe he'd cheated his runners by his absences from summer practice, the furnace in which his teams were always forged.

His wife smelled his uneasiness, and she wasn't so sure that she was ready to retire as Mrs. Coach. Cheryl approached the school board president, Linda Genel, and told her

that she'd had a dream in which her husband got the thing he'd been giving boys for decades—a second chance. The idea caught fire with the school board, and a contract was cobbled together that would permit Mr. White to receive his retirement pay yet be kept on as a full-time substitute gym teacher at the middle school for one more semester, so he could sing his swan song again with the boys of McFarland High. Mr. White agreed. All the runners seemed thrilled.

Except one.

Javi spiraled down . . . down . . . down. It was so easy, in a town plagued by gang violence and drug problems, to end up with your mug on a pickle jar on the counter at the Chevron station, soliciting donations to pay your burial expenses. But when the gunfire hit Javi's family last spring, it was his 22-year-old cousin, Ruben Juarez Jr., who died, and it was Ruben himself who pulled the trigger rather than surrender to police and face a third conviction that likely would've sent him to prison for life. Javi froze. He had grown up playing tag in the dark with Ruben. He stopped eating and studying, cut classes and track practices, piled up detentions and flunked history. He shut himself in his bedroom and let the confusion in his house howl around him.

"Go see Mr. White," begged his mother.

"I can't," muttered Javi.

"Why not?" asked his brother, Salvador.

"He doesn't care about us anymore," said Javi.

He entered a 5K road race in June and, before Mr. White's disbelieving eyes, crawled to the finish in 21 minutes. This was his next leader, his fastest returning senior, the one that Blanco's season of redemption would hinge on? Maybe, Mr. White and los veteranos began to suspect, working the fields—which Javi had never done—was more important than any of them had realized. Maybe the fields were what had burned the will into their runners all those years, and there was just no way this boy who read books could ever muster it. "Not bad, Javi, only five girls beat you," Mr. White fumed after the race. "Were you waiting for somebody, or just counting the flowers? What's a McFarland runner doing back there? You need to step it up. You need to wake up."

Ayon could see it coming, another slap to his hero's face, and could bear it no more. He invited Javi to a Chinese restaurant, waited until he lifted his fork over his beef and broccoli, and then cut loose, freezing that fork in midair for five minutes. "If you can't cut it, I don't care if you're a senior!" Ayon hissed. "You won't be on this team! What happened last year can't happen again. You've got to be a leader!"

Who's to say just when or why a boy begins to become a man? Maybe the death of his cousin finally cried out its counterpoint to Javi: Don't waste your life. It's too precious. Javi made a promise to God that he wouldn't waste it. Maybe it was seeing Mr. White show up on July 1 for the summer's first evening run, and every night after that, and the words Mr. White spoke to him after one evening run. "I know how you felt last year," he

said. "But I'm going to be here for you this year, every day. I'm going to give everything I've got, and I'm hoping you're going to give everything too." Javi still harbored doubts, still wondered if Mr. White was returning out of obligation rather than desire. But he stopped brooding and decided to give the coach that second chance, becoming resolute in his evening training, adding six-mile runs three mornings a week, hitting the weights in the afternoons and running in a wet vest in the pool. He wrote down his teammates' phone numbers to make sure they'd show up too.

Mr. White assessed his squad: a young one, teeming with promising freshmen and sophomores but lacking a single junior and crying out for leadership from the three seniors—Javi, Steven and Juan, introverts all. A state title? A tall task.

"We're going to low-key everything," declared Mr. White. "I want to enter the state meet under cover."

"We're not going to talk about doing it for Mr. White this year," Javi said. "We'll just see what happens." But privately he set three lofty goals: a sub-16-minute 5K; a top 10 state ranking for McFarland among all schools, regardless of size; and state championship number 10.

Two days before the season's first meet, gunfire erupted again, and two of Mr. White's former runners dropped. Jose Velasco, a pal of Javi's brother, died in a drive-by gang murder, and Jose's brother Aurelio survived a bullet in the neck. The Whites went to the Velascos' house on the double, still distraught over the stabbing death of another former runner just weeks earlier. Javi felt as if he were going to throw up. At night he stayed home, warned by his brother that retaliation was in the air and that more bullets might soon be too.

Three weeks later, at the Bell-Jeff Invitational in L.A., Javi led his team to a sweeping 2-3-7-8-10-11 finish as McFarland thrashed 58 schools—33 of them from higher divisions—to gain the No. 2 overall ranking in the state. Their cover was blown. They were in the headlines.

Then came trouble. Freshman phenom Julio Olvera fell hard for a girl, tumbled all the way into the caterpillar pile, then inflamed a nerve in his hip and ended up having to run for a month in a swimming pool. Juan Gonzalez hurt his knee and was finished, for all intents and purposes, for the season. Now McFarland was down to two seniors and a slew of raw freshmen and sophomores. Ninth-grader Baltazar Topete, the No. 5 varsity runner, informed Mr. White that he'd be retiring when Mr. White did because all this pain was pointless without him, and Cheryl kept asking, "Are you sure you want to leave, Jim? Are you sure you're ready?" until the old coach, too, began to wonder whether the torch could ever be passed.

Javi, too, had begun feeling the gravitational pull of a poor Mexican-American town. None of Javi's senior friends spoke of moving on, as if the next phase were a betrayal. "Go to college wherever you want," his father said when he learned that Javi was applying to UCLA, UC Santa Barbara, UC San Diego and San Diego State. "We just won't visit you." It was a leathery Mexican fieldworker's way of saying, "I'm going to

miss you, it hurts to think of you going away," but how was Javi, for all the reading he did, ever to read that deep between the lines?

Somehow everything was connected. Somehow McFarland's pack mentality and Javi's own fear of pulling away clutched at him even when it was time to leave everyone behind in a meet. Week after week he led his team across the finish line, but his times remained a half minute slower than his goal. "Kindergarten times," he snorted. "I'm holding back, running with people and not grinding them up. I'm looking for someone to go with, like Steve or Juan, someone I know."

And yet, barely realizing it, he'd begun imploring his teammates with the same words that Mr. White had once used on him: He was becoming a leader. Mr. White saw it one day in practice when he instructed his boys to cover a 4 1/2-mile steep uphill climb in 33:30. "No, we're not gonna run 33:30 like Mr. White said, we're gonna run it in 31:30," he heard Javi tell them, and then he watched Javi stay with the trailers, talk them through their pain and sheepdog every one of them home in 31:30. "He's just a different kid this year," Mr. White told people. "He's fantastic. He doesn't have that sad face anymore. He's talking, encouraging all the other kids and working his butt off."

The town bid its formal farewell to Mr. White at midseason. It draped banners for each of the championship years over the hoods of nine shiny new pickup trucks, filled them with runners, past and present, and enthroned Mr. and Mrs. White in a red Porsche at the front of the procession, waving regally while horns honked as if every virgin in town had just been married off. Then everyone sat down to celebrate a life, and Mr. White knew in his bones that he had to leave, this time for good.

In the second-to-last meet of the year, Javi's breakthrough race came at last, a blazing 16:07. "I actually believed in myself," he marveled. "It's peculiar. The fastest race I've ever run felt the easiest."

But there was no time to revel. Every day, every race, was little more than a prelude to what really mattered, the state championships two days after Thanksgiving. A countdown to Take 2 of Mr. White's final day.

Word went out to the vets. Don't spook the boys this time. Don't even mention that it's Mr. White's adios. No need even to show up in Fresno, matter of fact. Mum's the word, men. No Churchill from Blanco. Just another stroll in the park.

The old Javi reared his head. He showed up for McFarland's final practice a half hour late, well after stretching time, when team meetings were held and the leader might be expected to talk from the heart.

He slept in his mother's bed on the eve of the race, a night of freedom from his bedsprings, but still he tossed and turned for hours. A 16:01 or better would place him among the top 10 runners in McFarland's storied history and might pull the freshmen and the sophomores into the 16:30-to-16:45 range required to topple their more experienced foes. A loss, and Javi might go down as the runner who smothered both of Mr. White's last hurrahs. It wouldn't be easy, not with the team's leading freshman, Olvera, barely

recovered from his hip injury, and not with Carmel and Oak Park, the other two favorites in Division IV, coming in loaded with seniors.

Mr. White and his boys each dropped to one knee and prayed, the runners' white shorts and singlets stark against their brown skin and against Woodward Park's blaze of autumn oranges and yellows and reds. They all locked arms, and their eyes began to mist—exactly what Mr. White had been determined to avoid—as Juan Gonzalez stammered out how much he loved them all and how sorry he was that, because of his knee, he couldn't go to war with them. They walked to the starting line, where 184 other boys in other colors waited to take them down. Javi looked back. There, for the first time, stood his father.

The boys tapped fists. Mr. White and Ayon watched in silence. The gun sounded, and the two men hurried through the mass of spectators and across the creek to catch the boys at the first mile marker. Javi flew by it in 4:52, among the top 10, and his six teammates all managed 5:07 or better . . . not bad, not bad. Blanco's eyes clouded at the second mile marker—they'd bogged down too much in the hills!—then he bolted toward the finish to rally the final kick of his coaching life.

Six runners funneled through the chute, then Javi—he'd done his job, or near enough, with a 16:10 and seventh place, the second-fastest 5K of his life. He whirled at the finish line and squinted, waiting to glimpse the next flash of white breaking from the tree line . . . and waiting . . . and waiting, hope vanishing with every tick of the clock. Finally, at 16:51, they began to arrive, each nearly a half minute too slow, gasping their apologies to Javi.

He reeled away, no time to think, and wrapped his arms around his father and pulled him to his chest.

No one cried after Mr. White's last race. Blanco wouldn't let them, moving from runner to runner to let each one know that third place, behind Carmel and Oak Park, was no disgrace. "You couldn't do it all," he told Javi.

Javi looked up at his coach in a mournful daze. "Are you doing O.K., Mr. White?"

"I'm doing fine, Javi."

It was all over, and now Javi entered no-man's-land, waiting to see if his dream of studying astronomy and running in college would come true. Waiting to find out if he'd really do it, really walk away and reach the other side of the almonds and oranges and grapes, or if this season was the peak of his life, as it had been for so many other runners, and now he'd struggle the way they had when there was no Mr. White to run for.

No, he sensed. A boy couldn't walk away from McFarland, he had to run, and so he got up the next morning and ran six miles, and a few days later he upped it to eight, sometimes even 10, as if the season had never ended. "If I don't stop," he said, "I'll keep going."

The team's last night together came at their banquet seven weeks ago. Javi wouldn't go to the podium, just couldn't do it, to express the team's feelings about Mr. White, leaving that to Juan. But Javi hung on every sentence from Mr. White, and when tears streamed down the coach's cheeks and he croaked, "I felt like I deserted the boys a little last year," the words went inside Javi and melted one more layer of ice.

"It felt like a victory, no, not a victory . . . a breakthrough," Javi said. "Something more than 'good job,' because we've heard plenty of 'good jobs.' Something from his heart. I know I should've been more understanding of him. I know I lost a relationship with a good man. And so as I was leaving I told him . . . uh . . . 'I just hope you won't be a stranger and I won't be a stranger. I hope I see you more often,' and Mr. White said, 'Yeah,' and . . . and it's not anything big, but I gave him a hug. I know it sounds like something small, but I'd never done it before, and for me it felt big. Maybe it wasn't as big for him as it was for me, but I . . . I was just trying to tell him something."

Mr. White got it. He walked away feeling wonderful about Javi and the deep shelf of talent he was leaving behind, vowing to the boys that he'd be back to watch them run, then drying his eyes and heading for his mountain cabin with Mrs. Coach.

And Javi? He lies in bed at night now staring at the planets on the wall, wondering if he'll ever sort the whole thing out. He had reached none of his three goals—not the state title, not the top 10 ranking, not the sub-16 5K—but his final season had given him something else, fruits he hadn't even thought to reach for. In those last two races he'd finally learned to run without the McFarland pack: He'd become a racer. And up on his wall hung that hug with his father, a picture splashed across five columns of *The Bakersfield Californian* that brought tears to his dad's eyes and kept bringing him back into Javi's room to peer at it in the moonlight while his son slept. And in Javi's heart hung that other hug, with that other man, that moment when at last he didn't run.