

## The Sprinter

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

It is the year 2030 and a great war now rages between two distinct groups of humanoids. While once believed to be in one single subspecies, modern genomic research from the early 2020s revealed that *Homo sapiens sapiens* were very much distinct from the newly described *Homo sapiens horribilis*. One key difference between the two subspecies of man was behavioral. The ‘horribilis’ were more aggressive and pugilistic, often known to be on a range of predation considered to be cannibalistic or intraspecific. This dietary difference was in turn tied into a difference in jaw structure along with sharper and more pronounced canine teeth. While *Homo sapiens sapiens* had a diet that was considered omnivorous, ranging from a vegan diet to a diet comprising various types of animal flesh, the differences in tooth and jaw structure was still noteworthy, much like the distinct characteristics of Finch beak morphology described by Sir Charles Darwin while on his Beagle voyage.

Amid this modern humanoid war, an unknown ‘horribilis’ violently claims the life of renowned Caribbean sprinter Andrew Pennington, who ran for gold on Great Britain’s national track and field team. With the World Championships a month away and the Olympics in the same calendar year, Pennington’s elite sporting agency opts to cover up the murderous death and stage an audition for a replacement double to try to place high on the podium for Britain. The conditions of the contract involve adopting Pennington’s name and identity for at least one running season with a vow of secrecy about the true circumstances regarding the running alias. Also, the double is to perform in all seasonal track events—with exceptions in regards to injuries—at a super-elite level without the use of illegal or banned substances.

Last to be interviewed in the ‘Pennington audition’ is Alexander Mahome, a young track star in his freshman year at a college in the United States. The selection panel enters the last set of questions in the interview process.

“You said in your application that you lost a family member to a ‘horribilis’ when you were a child, tell us how this shaped who you are today.” A woman seated in the middle of the panel addresses the candidate in a calm manner.

“Well... I recall losing my mother when I was about 8 years old. Dad was caught up with something at the hospital and mom answered the door. She shielded me and my two sisters in the home. That’s the last I ever saw of her.” Alexander answers with a tone of sadness.

“Tell us about track and field. Can you sustain a long season and bring in consistent podium finishes at international meets?” A male interviewer asks with a tone of sporting professionalism.

“I love running. It’s always been the foundation of my successes. I’ve played some Division 1 baseball and continuing to compete in NCAA track throughout the year keeps

me healthy and on the ball. I haven't been to international events yet, but I was top 3 in nationals this calendar year in 100m, 200m and 4x100m relay. I think with the right coaching, regiments and attitude, I can place high at Worlds." Mahome answers with a reserved confidence.

"Thank you Mr. Mahome. We'll get back to you at the end of the week, once we've selected our lead candidate." The same female interviewer says as she stands up with the two others to shake the auditioner's hand.

After a few days of deliberation, the British Track and Field team selects Alexander Mahome to run in the World Championships as the famed Andrew Pennington. Three weeks before the World Championships held in Dubai, Alex Mahome is called in by his new agency for a promotional photo shoot. For three hours in the dressing room, the young track and fielder is given a special coiffure and makeover to look as seamlessly as possible to the famed Pennington.

"That looks spot on!" A tall and slender hair and makeup specialist says to the young Mr. Mahome.

"Are you sure this nose bridge is going to hold?" The sprinter asks.

"We've fastened it with special adhesive. Now that the look works, you just have to rehearse your speech training." Another stylist says.

"I'm working on talking with a bit of British twang and making my pitch a tad higher. My main concern right now is running like Arthur. I used to clench my fists as I would stride but I have to adjust to doing the same with an open hand. An old habit to break, I guess." The new Pennington says to the stylist.

"Good luck at your training sessions. We've got you booked for 4 hour workouts all of next week and the following week. Then you catch your flight to Dubai and the Worlds." Mahome's agent tells the sprinter as the photographer enters the dressing room to escort the runner into adjacent photo studio.

Three weeks later, the World Track and Field Championships are broadcast on live channels throughout Great Britain. On the third floor of an impoverished apartment in Tower Hamlets London Borough, a young fan of Arthur Pennington is happy that she can watch her favorite sprinter compete for gold in the 200 metres. Without access to the internet, she watches the broadcast on a small television screen with a bit of digitized static and a slight interference in the reception.

"Running in lane number four... Great Britain's national record holder and Olympian... ARTHUR PENNINGTON!" The track announcer calls out as the crowd erupts with loud applause. After hearing the introduction, the Pennington double does his characteristic wave and special salute as naturally as possible. After the remaining sprinters closer to the outside of the oval are introduced, Britain's runner loosens his legs and readies himself to get in the proper starting position at the starters blocks.

“SET...” A head track official says in a mildly robotic voice. No more than a full second afterwards, the start gun goes off as the sprinters hurl themselves forward from an inclined position to a more upright and energized gait. As they reach the bend in the oval, Britain’s top competitor begins to pull ahead, with an American runner to his left trying to equal or better his powerful strides. Soon, the man believed by fans to be the famed Pennington, crosses the finish first in a time of 19:63, almost equalling a personal best of the now deceased Caribbean-born British runner.

“Mom! Pennington won again!” Young Maisy shouts from the small living room.

“That’s great dear, let’s head out to Thrift Value now. They’re closing the store in two weeks to build a condo there. I think there may be some special deals.” Maisy’s mother calls out from the kitchen nearby.

“Ok mom.” The young girl says as she watches the champion track and fielder taking a victory lap with the Union Jack draped over his shoulders.

Soon after, Maisy and her mother take a shopping trolley and walk out into the streets of London’s East End en route to their local Thrift Value outlet. As they walk south toward the River Thames, they both reach the large lot of the thrift store where a sign signals illustrates the impending condo development scheduled for early next month.

“I’m going to check the houseware section dear, don’t wander off too much. I’ll let you pick out something from the toy section since your birthday is coming up.”

“Thanks mom!” Maisy says as they both enter through the revolving doors and head off to opposite parts of the store. As the young girl finds her way into the toy section, a long line snakes around the shoe and boot department as fall nears and the summer begins to wind down. Squeezing her way through a crowd of busy shoppers, Maisy suddenly eyes a small porcelain doll complete with a floral dress and red-coloured shoes. The doll is wedged next to an old wooden tennis racket and a pair of pink roller skates. Immediately, the young girl grabs the doll and holds it tight. She then takes her special find to her mother who is looking for an old set of suitable dinner plates in Thrift Value’s houseware section.

“Mommy... I found something in the toy section. It’s a small doll. I think I’ll call her Rosie.”

“Ok dear. If that’s your pick for today. You only get one toy though right?”

“I know mommy. Rosie is all that I want.”

Soon, the two satisfied shoppers join the long queue and make their last purchase in the store before its impending closing date.

When Maisy arrives home with her mother, she checks out the porcelain doll as her mother watches the daily evening news broadcast of the BBC. As footage shows highlights of Britain’s 200 metre gold at the World Championships along with a short

interview of the sprinter, the young girl removes the doll's small red shoes and finds a folded message hidden inside. The message reads:

*June 25<sup>th</sup> 2030*

*My name is Chloe and I'm seven years old. Last month I lost mommy and daddy when a scary 'horribilis' broke into the first floor of our home in Sussex while I hid in a small cubby-hole of our attic with only a blanket and little Deirdre in my arms. When you find this message (whoever you are) take good care of her for me.*

~Chloe Finn

The END