

Austin  
Pace

**I****N OUR TOWN**, high school doesn't start in ninth grade. A hundred years ago, some founding father decided that seventh through ninth grades belonged in junior high school, and no one's bothered to change it since. It was the first day of the last year of junior high, and Austin was already at it. He was even early that morning, jogging around the track. Coach Shuler hadn't even come in yet and there was Austin, in last year's gym shorts, running in circles for the whole world to see. I am certain he was doing it for that reason—so the whole school could walk by and say, "Wow, Austin's really dedicated, isn't he?"

Well, I was dedicated, too, but I didn't flaunt it in public.

Austin is good at a large number of things. Good enough for people to notice, but not enough to be labeled "a brain," or "a jock," or "a nerd," or anything. In short, he's what every kid wants to be, or at least what I always wanted to be. He is, in his own way, perfection on two feet, and he knows

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it. I hated him. He didn't know that. To him I was just one of his many friends. If he had been a year or two older than me, he might have been someone I looked up to, can you believe that? He loves it when younger kids look up to him. I'm not younger, though; I'm three months older than him. And he never really treated me like a friend—or even like an equal. He kind of treated me like a worm—or at least tried to make me feel like one.

I used to think it was because I was the one who started up that now infamous nickname that still plagued his existence:

L'Austin Space.

The name stuck to him like Velcro, and he could never peel it off. Yeah, I used to think that was why he treated me like he did, but that wasn't it. It ran deeper and stronger than that. You see, unlike everyone else, I was the only one who came close to being a threat to him.

Like I said, Austin's good in everything, but there was only one thing that he was out-and-out great at. He could run. As a kid everyone knew he was fast. He beat everyone he ever challenged—even kids older than him—for as long as I can remember.

And, for as long as I can remember, I was second fastest; always the second-best runner. It wouldn't have been so bad being second-best, but you see, it was what I did best out of everything—just like Cheryl and her singing. I wasn't out-

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standing in any of my classes, and I wasn't the most popular guy in school. Whatever it was, I was always somewhere in the middle. I was the guy you would never notice. They used to call me the Generic Kid when I was ten, because at day camp none of the counselors could remember my name. I just didn't stand out.

But I could run, and when you're a fast runner there's nothing like that feeling as you pick up speed, actually feel your body accelerate, and you realize that the wind isn't a wind at all, it's just you cutting through the still air like a bullet. There's nothing like that feeling when you know that this is what you do well, and nobody can take it away.

Nobody but L'Austin Space.

He took it away real good—and not so much by beating me, but by purposely making me feel like I wasn't worth a thing. He knew exactly what to say to squash me beneath his big toe. Things like, "*Maybe it's your running shoes that make you slow,*" or "*Maybe next year your legs will grow longer and you'll have a fighting chance,*" or maybe he would just look at me with that silent gloat in his smile after beating me in yet another race.

I don't know why, but it seemed that Coach Shuler always put us in the same races. We would take first and second, but when Austin and I were racing, there were no places, only winner and loser, and I was always, without exception, the loser.

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Once I was the best: that one year when Austin's father, who is a professor, took the whole family traipsing around South America for a whole year. It was in seventh grade—first year on the junior high school team—that I finally got to see that finish-line ribbon, to feel it pull across my chest as I crossed the line. I was hot then, the hero, popular—everything I could have wanted.

Then Austin came back, like I knew he would.

I remember the beginning of eighth grade, before the coach knew him. We were lined up for time trials, and just before Austin was to go, he turned to me and gave me that smile. The smile that said, "You're nothing, Jared Mercer . . . and I'll prove it." The coach yelled go, Austin took off, and blew my sixty-yard time sky-high. He beat it by almost half a second, which might not seem like much, but races are lost by hundredths of seconds.

From that moment on I was a backseater again, the Generic Kid, living in the bigger-than-life shadow of L'Austin Space. But this time it was worse, because I had tasted what it was like to be a winner, and Austin was determined to make sure I would never taste it again.

"You take these things too seriously," my father would say. "So, he's faster than you. Big deal. I'll bet there are things you do better than he does."

But there weren't, and my father just didn't understand. It wasn't just that he was faster than me, it was that I was

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second, and nobody on this earth could care less about runners-up.

On that first morning of ninth grade, I watched Austin from the stands. He knew I was there. He had to know; I was the only one in the bleachers. He ran around and around the dirt track in his bright white running shoes that never seemed to get dirty. It looked like he was going to go until the first bell rang, but then he stopped, stepped inside the track, and went to the highest point of the oval. I knew what he was going to do. He did it all the time. His schoolbag sat there at the tip of the oval track. He took his blue digital chronometer—the one the coach gave him after last year's final meet—and set it to zero. Then he took his running shoes and socks off, and stared at an invisible spot in front of him, straight across the middle of the field, to the other tip of the oval. He took his starting position, clicked the chronometer, and took off in his bare feet.

It hurt to watch his speed. He tore through the grass like a racehorse on turf and was at the other end of the oval much too soon.

He looked at the time his chronometer had logged, then he pretended to notice me for the first time. He waved. I waved back. He stretched out his legs, went to get his shoes, then came by the bleachers.

"What's up, Jared?" he said. "Have a good summer?"

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"Pretty good. What about you?"

"Great!" he said. He put his foot up on the first bench and stretched his calf muscle. "You like my running shoes?" he asked. "They're Aeropeds. The best running shoe made. Cost almost two hundred bucks."

I nodded.

"Maybe if you had these shoes," said L'Austin, "you *might* be able to come close to giving me some competition this year, huh?"

"Maybe," I said, which wasn't what I wanted to say. I won't tell you what I wanted to say.

"Been workin' out?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. I had been. Every spare moment I had.

"Good. Me, too. Every day, all summer up at Junior National Running Camp. Hey, guess what?"

"What?"

"I might qualify for the Junior NCAA championships."

"Really."

"Uh-huh. Tough competition, but my time now is averaging a quarter of a second faster than last year's sixty-yard qualifying time, so I've been trying to get it even lower. My dad says if I qualify, then next year he'll find me a private coach and train me for the Olympics." He smiled that I'm-better-than-you smile at me. "So," he said, "what have you been up to?"

"Me? Oh, I just went to European Runners Training

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Camp, where you run cross-country up and down the Alps all day long with famous Olympic athletes."

"Really?"

I sighed. "No. Actually I just hung around and worked at Burger King making hamburgers. Hard work, that Burger King. Builds muscles in your fingers."

"I'll bet," said Austin.

"You know I was the youngest one they ever had working at that Burger King?"

"Yeah, well that makes sense," said Austin. "I mean, who else are they gonna get to do the stupid flunky work but a kid, right?"

I didn't say anything after that.

"Well, I gotta go change," said L'Austin. "You coming to the first track meeting this afternoon?"

"Of course."

"Well, get there on time," he said, smiling that crocodile smile at me. "They're picking team captain today. I wouldn't want you to miss that." He turned and ran toward the locker room.

Team captain today. Already that smoldering feeling was growing. Austin had done it again. In five minutes he had put me beneath his two-hundred-dollar running shoes, and flattened me like a cigarette butt.

"You ain't got a chance against him," said a voice a few feet away from me. Standing there, right next to the bleach-

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ers, was Tyson McGaw, who, when it came to being weird, was head and shoulders above the rest. Tyson had stringy greasy hair, a dirty face, and his left nostril was larger than his right because he spent so much time with his finger in it. Nobody much liked Tyson, and he was definitely not the person I cared to talk to right now. Not after being humiliated by L'Austin Space.

"Why don't you mind your own business, Tyson?" I said. "People don't like you spying on 'em."

"I wasn't spying!" said Tyson, mean and defensively, like he was looking to get into another one of his famous fights. Tyson was an odd bird. Half of the time he seemed kinda nerdy and off in his own greasy little world; the other half of the time he was being nasty and picking fights like he was a tough. The last thing I wanted on the first morning of school was to fight Tyson. Not that I couldn't beat him up; I could—he was kinda weak and scrawny. It's just that he doesn't really fight like a human. He fights more like an animal, kicking and clawing and biting.

"Well, spying or not—whatever you want to call it—don't do it anymore . . . at least not to me, 'cause I don't like it."

I got down from the bleachers, and began to walk toward the school building.

"You really don't stand a chance," mumbled Tyson as I passed him.

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"And how would you know?" I yelled into his face. Now I was mad! "You're not on the team—you're not on any team! All you do is watch everybody else's business, and stick your nose in it. Don't you have any business of your own? What goes on between Austin and me has nothing to do with you, got that?"

Tyson shut up. I don't think he expected me to get that mad.

"Just get out of my sight, Tyson. Don't talk to me unless you have something decent to say." I turned and walked toward class. Tyson mumbled something nasty beneath his breath, but I didn't want to push it any further. I ignored him and continued walking.

As I got into the building my anger shifted away from Tyson, and back to Austin. What burned me most was that Tyson was probably right: conceited, arrogant L'Austin Space had all the odds in his favor, and I hated Austin all the more for it. I began to imagine how nice it would be if there was a great conspiracy against all the L'Austin Spaces in the world.

"Now, I want you all to know right up front that this is no namby-pamby team," said Coach Shuler, as he fidgeted with his whistle. "Once you're in, I don't want you all quitting and joining Little League, or a soccer club, or something like that. This might not be high school, and we might not work

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out five days a week, but anyone who knows me can tell you that I expect hard work. Isn't that right, Jared?"

"Right!" I said, surprised that he called me out of everyone else.

"So if you don't want to be here, leave now."

In the back, two seventh graders, who in one day had already gotten a reputation of being obnoxious, stood and went to the door, laughing. As they left, one of them turned and said, "Adios, Commandant." Some seventh graders laughed. No one who knew Shuler laughed.

Shuler looked at his clipboard. "First of all, boys meet Mondays and Wednesdays; girls meet Tuesdays and Thursdays. Anyone who wants to can practice with both teams . . ."

As Shuler spoke, my mind began to wander. I looked around the gym. It smelled new, but didn't look much different than the old gym. You would think that when a gym burns down, a school would build a nice, new-looking one, but no. This gym was a carbon copy of the old one.

In each corner of the gym, a different team was meeting, and more were meeting outside. It looked like about forty kids were going out for track—a few more boys than girls. By next week that number would be cut in half. The coach never cut anybody, but people just lose interest and drop out.

L'Austin Space sat about ten feet away from me. He sat

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in the middle of a crew of seventh graders, already setting himself up to be the "Team Hero" for all of the new kids to look up to.

Shuler flipped a page on his clipboard. "As you can see, we have a beautiful new gym . . . and because of last year's fires, the gym is completely off-limits when a teacher isn't present. The doors will remain locked. That goes for the auditorium, and just about every other unsupervised place. I know you've heard it from all of your teachers—now you're hearing it from me." He flipped another page.

"Next, we have something new this year. Something I think you're going to like. A bunch of the local school districts are getting together to have a sort of mini-Olympics, and yes, there will be track events."

There were various cheers from around the room, including my own.

"That's the good news," said Shuler. "The bad news is that each district enters one team, which means that each school can only have one runner."

Various "Aws" from the group. I kept quiet. I'm sure Austin did, too. I felt a knot begin to form in my stomach.

"Now, before we go down and assign you gym lockers, there's one more order of business."

"The captain!" said Martin Bricker, an eighth grader who had a good chance of being captain next year, but was the only one who thought he would make it this year.

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"That's right," said Shuler. "This is for old team members only. Here are pencils and slips of paper. When I say so, I would like all the old team members to come up and fill out a ballot. All you have to do is put the name of the person you would like to be captain this year."

"Don't we get to campaign?" asked L'Austin.

"No, we don't get to campaign," mimicked Shuler. "You all know each other; you don't need any presidential debates. There will be one captain for the boys, and one captain for the girls. Boys vote for boys; girls vote for girls. If you're not sure what you are, ask me and I'll tell you."

Someone lifted Sarah Dozer's hand. She elbowed him in the ribs.

"OK. Come on up. Here's the ballot box, and *please* put the pencils back in the can when you're done."

I filled in Martin Bricker's name, figuring it was low-class to vote for myself, and I certainly wasn't about to vote for Austin.

As Austin approached the ballot box, he turned to me and smiled that crocodile smile that screamed "You loser!" from across the room. I smiled that "We'll see" smile right back at him.

"When will you have the results?" asked Martin.

"They'll be posted on the main bulletin board tomorrow, by lunch."

The group groaned.

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"C'mon, it's only one day. Now, when I call your name, come up and I'll give you your locker number."

That night Cheryl and I sat in her old tree house, talking and trying to get my mind off of the election. I never remembered the tree house being so small. I bet it was even too small for Randall to sit in comfortably now. Sometimes I like growing, but at times like that I didn't. I remember when I could lie down across the floor in the tree house. It could fit all three of us—me, Cheryl, and Randall—each in our sleeping bags, late at night, telling ghost stories and drinking chocolate shakes, which were still one of my favorite foods in the world. I loved those days.

Now I couldn't even sit in it without bending my knees. It had been almost a year since I had been in it. Cheryl only lived down the street, but we never had much of a reason to go up into the tree house anymore.

It was Cheryl who had said, "Let's talk in the tree house," and I had said, "Fine," figuring it would cheer me up. Now, an hour later, the twilight was more twi than light, and the early September chill had come rolling in off the ocean.

"What else?" said Cheryl. "Keep thinking."

"I don't know, I can't think of any more."

"Don't you have any imagination?"

"No."

"Yes, you do," she said.

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"OK... umm." I thought hard. "I know... I would hang him by his toes... upside down... over a bear trap."

Cheryl laughed. "Now you're getting really gross."

"You asked for it. Your turn."

"OK. Next time she sings... I would throw roses at her, like that guy did, for her to put behind her ears. Only I would make sure they had lots of thorns on 'em!"

I grimaced.

"Your turn," she said.

"I would set Austin loose in Lion Country Wild Animal Park, and see how fast he runs. Next."

"Oohh! Vicious! Let's see... I would... I would fill her little lunch-box thermos with hydrochloric acid."

"Not fair," I said. "I said that one at the wedding."

"Well, then how about a king cobra in her lunch box?"

"No, wait... I've got one for you," I said. "Why don't we get her a nice date... with Tyson McGaw?"

"Ugh! A fate worse than death!" We both laughed good and hard just trying to imagine Rebecca and slimy Tyson McGaw together. What a match!

"I can't believe we're really this nasty!" I said.

"But isn't it fun?" said Cheryl.

I guess it was. It was sort of like watching those horror movies. Sure, they're sick and gross and bloody and all that, but everyone still loves them, right?

"I mean, it's not like we're really doing anything to them," said Cheryl. "We're not *really* mean and terrible, it's

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just a game. Everybody has someone that really irks them, and there's nothing wrong with pretending, right?"

"Wait a second, I just had a brainstorm," I said. "We'll pay some bozo to pretend to teach Austin to walk on hot coals, and when he finally goes for it, he'll burn off his feet. So much for running!"

"You're awful," laughed Cheryl. Then she stopped laughing, and thought for a moment. Without the sound of our voices, the night seemed very quiet. I don't think I heard as much as one cricket.

"Hey," she said, "wouldn't it be weird if any of those things actually happened to Austin or Rebecca? Like somebody up there was listening?"

"I'll make sure I keep my eye out for bear traps," I said. She laughed. I could barely see her now, in the shadows on the other side of the tree house. Like I said, it was small; I could feel her Reeboks touching my Nikes. I wiggled my feet, and she wiggled back, like we were playing footsy, or something dumb like that. I looked over the edge railing. It was clear that night. No fog like the last few nights. Cheryl's house was the last on the street, and from there you could just barely see the ocean between the trees, a quarter mile away. It was my favorite time of day—when the faint blue glow against the horizon is just enough to make everything look black against it, just after the colors have faded from the sky.

Back when we were kids, I always loved talking with



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Cheryl, and even with Randall, in the tree house at this time of day. Ghost stories, or even just stupid-talk. Now that we were older and busier, it seemed as though I never really got to talk to Cheryl alone when it was quiet like this. It was different from the old days, but I still liked it. I wiggled my feet again, and she wiggled back.

"Maybe we shouldn't have done all that before," she said.

"What?"

"Talk mean about Rebecca and Austin. It's like I feel guilty now."

Now that we had stopped, I began to feel it, too. "Well, it was your idea."

"Thanks, now I feel worse."

"Sorry," I said. Then I gave her her own speech back. "It's only words," I said. "It's only like . . . sticking your tongue out at them. That's all. Like you said, it's only pretend. We're not hurting anybody."

"Right."

"It gets out all our frustrations and stuff, so we don't go around being angry at them all day."

"Right."

Somehow I still don't think I convinced her. I didn't convince myself, either. I couldn't—not when my mind was still filled with all those nasty, ridiculous things that could be brought down upon L'Austin Space. What bothered me

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most was that, like Cheryl said, it was fun. I didn't like feeling that it was fun.

I moved closer to Cheryl. Somehow I felt that moving closer to her would make that creepy feeling go away.

"Do you really hate Austin?" Cheryl asked. I couldn't see her talking now, it was too dark. I could just barely make out her shape against the trees behind her.

"I don't know," I said. "Do you really hate Rebecca?"

Cheryl sighed and didn't answer for a long time. Then she said, "It's not really hate. She's my cousin. I care about her . . . but sometimes I think she enjoys making me feel lousy."

"I know Austin does."

"Do you really hate Austin, Jared?" she asked again.

"I don't know," I said for a second time. I really didn't know. "It's all gotten so confused."

She thought for a good long time. "Would you be happy if Austin Pace moved far away?" she asked very matter-of-factly.

"Yes," I said.

"Would you be happy if he got hurt so bad that he couldn't run fast?"

"I don't think so. I think I'd feel sorry for him."

"How about if he died?"

"Cheryl! C'mon!"

"Sorry, dumb question." She was silent for a long, long

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time. She was thinking about something. I could tell. Then she finally spoke, very quietly, and slowly.

"I know what the real question is," she said. "The real question to find out whether or not you hate him."

"What?"

"The question is . . . if there were a way for you to make it happen . . . would you wish that Austin Pace had never been born?"

The cold of the night hit me just then, but I don't think it was just the cold. It was something more. Something inside, not out. And it was because I knew the answer to that question, and I didn't like that answer at all.

"Would you?" she asked again.

"Yes," I whispered.

And then she whispered back, "I know how that feels."

The breeze played with the dying leaves above us. The chill got stronger. Before, I had just felt nasty. Now I felt weird. Weird and uncomfortable—with myself, and with that question. Do I wish L'Austin Space had never been born? Yes. Yes, I wished that. As much as I hated myself for wishing that, deep down, really deep down, I did feel that way, and I couldn't change that. It was scary.

"Cheryl . . . I'm spooked out."

"Me, too," she said.

"It's getting cold . . ." I said.

"Maybe we should go in."

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Cheryl went first, and I followed her down.

"You really do feel that way, too, huh?"

"I don't want to talk about that anymore. Let's talk about something nice."

But we didn't talk about anything nice. We didn't talk much about anything at all. That good feeling we had when we first climbed into the tree house was gone, and wouldn't come back for the rest of the night. We went in, watched ten minutes of TV with her brother, then I hopped on my bike and rode home. I tried to chase that eerie feeling away by burying my head in that first night's homework.

It worked. By morning the feeling was gone. I felt like my old self and went on as if what we had discovered about ourselves in the tree house that night meant absolutely nothing at all.

Ignoring that night was a mistake—not the first one, and not the last one either. Maybe that feeling was meant to be a warning, a bright red alarm flashing in our eyes. If it was, we were both too stupid to notice it.