

DON'T STOP

by James Patrick Kelly

The author's latest venture is James Patrick Kelly's StoryPod on Audible.com www.audible.com/jim_kelly, which features Jim reading fifty-two of his own stories for downloading to MP3 players. He'll be reading "Don't Stop" on the StoryPod in the fall. Of this story, he says, "I was captain of my high school cross-country and track teams and have been running ever since."

* * * *

Lisa Schoonover is the only one who can see Crispin and the dead people. If she lets herself think about this, it still scares her, even though Crispin has been following her since she was six. On her worst days, Lisa calls in sick to the DVDeal, closes the closet door behind her and sits on her running shoes to get away from him. Mostly she pretends he isn't there, although she worries that it isn't healthy. If he isn't real, then she must be as crazy as everyone in town thinks she is. She'd ask him about it, but he doesn't talk.

Of course, Crispin isn't someone you would pick out in a crowd, even if you *could* see him. He has grown up with Lisa and now looks to be about her age, or at least in his late thirties. Eyes gray, a full head of chocolate brown hair. Just south of six feet tall and plain as white socks. Except he's in shape. A runner like her. That's the one thing that Lisa knows for sure about Crispin. Today he's wearing blue microfiber pants with mesh insets down the sides and a gray Fila long-sleeve tee against the fall chill. Lisa has already described Crispin's outfit for her journal. Since she began keeping a record three years ago, she has become convinced that he has never worn the same running outfit twice. Recently she's been puzzling over this. Maybe some kind of fashion communication? His Air Pegasus trainers are this year's model, dazzling just-out-of-the-box white with black highlights and the red swoosh. From watching him run, Lisa guesses that he's a slight underpronator with high arches.

Lisa wears the Brooks Trance NXTs that Matt bought her last week. They ease the stress on her flat feet, although they do nothing at all to help with the stress of deciding what to do about Matt. She steps off the sidewalk, settles on the grass in Kearsarge Park and begins her stretches. Hamstring, quads, hip. She has to be more careful than she was back when she was running cross country for Coach Ward in high school. She had problems with both of her Achilles tendons last year. Couldn't jog for most of April. Crispin is stretching about a dozen yards away, doing wall pushups against the Spanish War monument.

Actually, Lisa doesn't really know what his name is.

When six-year-old Lisa came home from the hospital after the car crash that killed her father, she told her mother about the weird boy in gray sweats and black

Keds nobody else could see. He was following her around, sometimes even into the bathroom. Annette Schoonover would smile and pretend to believe in Crispin for her daughter's sake. He must be Lisa's guardian angel, her mother said, sent by God to watch over her now that Daddy was in heaven. It was the best explanation her mother could come up with. And it was less bother than therapy, although Lisa didn't realize *that* until years later. To reassure her daughter, her mother had decided that they should give Lisa's guardian angel a name. She thought Crispin was appropriately holy. The name of a famous saint or maybe one of King Arthur's knights; she wasn't sure. Her mother was often hazy about details after cocktail hour.

Lisa believed that Crispin was an angel right through fourth grade, even though he didn't really act the part. He never once glowed with divine glory like the angels in pictures. He certainly didn't have wings. And he would never come into St. Brigit's. He'd lurk just outside the double arched doors when Lisa and her mother went to Mass on Sunday. You'd think a guardian angel would want to get closer to God. But then what kind of cruel God would curse a little girl with an angel only she could see? Eventually Lisa came to envy Crispin out there, drinking in the sweet blue sky while she was trapped in the flicker of candles and the prayerful gloom and her mother's widowed melancholy.

Not long after that she saw her first dead person. Mrs. Grapelli had lived three houses down from the Schoonovers on Bank Street.

Lisa tries to run year round but bad weather sometimes defeats her best intentions. Running in the rain makes her shoes feel like concrete blocks. She missed this morning's workout because of the storm. But skies are clearing now and she can dodge any leftover puddles. The late afternoon sun rides her shoulders as she starts along the Squamscott River at an easy nine-minute-mile pace. The change in weather has brought more than the usual traffic onto the path that the Conservation Commission paved over the old railroad right-of-way: Anne What's-Her-Name in chartreuse and pink nylon, firm of muscle and purpose, pushing her baby in a stroller; that pop-eyed man who bought the McCrillises' overpriced McMansion; Helen Barone, the girls' soccer coach at Tuck Academy, who was killed by a drunk driver over in Barnstead; ancient Hiram Foster in tatty sweatpants, rerunning the track meets of his youth; some little boys who are chasing each other just because it's Tuesday. As she jogs past a pair of high-school girls in spandex shorts and halter-tops, one of them staggers and then doubles over as if she's been punched. Alarmed, Lisa turns and jogs in place to see if she's all right. But the girl isn't hurt; she's laughing. "What?" says her companion, giggling. "*What?*" But Lisa knows: they're laughing at her because they're young and sleek and oblivious and she's forty-two and stringy and the town headcase who sees far too much, including dead people. Of course, Matt would probably say that she's just being paranoid. Matt always sounds so reasonable, even when he's wrong. For instance, he wants her to move in with him, even though he refuses to believe in Crispin. But Lisa knows that Matt cares for her. He's trying to understand, even though he probably never will.

Crispin slips past the girls, although of course they have no way of knowing that. He prefers to stay behind her, Crispin does. Doesn't like to catch up.

The path ends at the Squamscott Bridge and she pulls up at the light on Route 23, marking time while she waits for it to change. Her Trances pad against the sidewalk and she takes stock of herself. Her left calf is still a little tight but it's not a problem. Her cheeks are hot and she can feel blood shouting in her ears. She breathes deeply against the stretch of her sports bra. She is aroused by today's run; it's been happening a lot lately. Lisa thinks about what it would be like if she were going home to Matt's condo instead of her mother's house. She imagines him inviting her to his bed. Their bed. *No babe*, he says, *don't bother with a shower*. She breathes. *I love the way you smell*. He breathes. *We'll take one together*. His voice is like a feather tickling her ear. *Afterward*. She grins and traces his lips with her forefinger. They kiss, their breath mingling. The buttons of his shirt yield to her touch and she slides her hand through the hair on his chest. He eases her nylon shorts around her hips. They slither down her legs and catch at her ankles.

The light changes.

Running never used to turn her on, but then Matt is new in her life since the fourth of July. When they started sleeping together, everything changed. Even Crispin. Whenever Matt enters a room, Crispin leaves. It's as if there isn't room enough in her head for the two of them. Maybe that's because Matt is such a big man. Solid as two refrigerators. He has a scraggly blonde beard and feral hair. Some people find him scary. But Matt's hands are soft and his voice wraps around Lisa like a blanket. He makes her feel safe and sexy. Crispin has always made Lisa feel exposed; she can't relax if he's following her. Especially if she's making love. He watched her very first kiss through the window of Tommy Falucci's bedroom and has observed all her desperate couplings in the twenty-some years since.

Is that the reason why she's falling in love with Matt—because he chases Crispin off? It's a thought that Lisa tries to block out by counting steps as she chops Bride's Hill. She read someplace that when you run, your feet strike the ground between seventy and a hundred times a minute, each time with a force three times the weight of your body. Her legs feel like logs but then she reaches the top of the hill and turns, running in place as her hometown unfolds beneath her like the map of her life. She watches Crispin laboring up Bride's Hill Road, head down, arms churning.

After Lisa had stopped believing in angels, she decided that Crispin must be her imaginary friend. That lie got her well into eighth grade, which is when she first saw the Jimmy Stewart movie where he's an alcoholic and his best friend is an invisible rabbit. *Harvey*. For a while she liked to pretend that her life was like that movie, although she knew that was another delusion, since Jimmy Stewart was always drunk but never fell down or slurred a single word. Lisa started drinking in high school and went steady with vodka all through her twenties; she fell down with stunning regularity. Her mother's daughter. But Crispin didn't seem to care whether

she lived or died. Imaginary or not, he was no friend to her.

Actually, Lisa isn't sure she has ever had a friend, other than Matt. Of course, she *knows* a lot of people. Dover is a small town, after all, and she's lived in it all her life. But as soon as she steps onto the path of intimacy, Crispin blocks the way. Lisa imagines that friendship is about trust, but if she shares her secret, she is always betrayed. It isn't so much that people feel sorry for her or that they urge her to get help. She understands that. Rather it's that they can't accept that she has tried everything—twice—and nothing has worked. Ever. They act as if it's somehow her fault that there's no cure for Crispin. Sometimes, even Matt....

“Never get there running in place, Schoonover.”

Lisa is startled. For a moment she thinks that Crispin has spoken, after a lifetime of silence. But he's still in front of her, just now cresting the hill, a line of dark sweat defining his sternum. She turns and sees Coach Billy Ward giving her his sly smile. His face looks drawn, even in the slant light. His legs are pale as eggs and his quadriceps have wasted, making his knees even knobbier. Otherwise he seems fit enough for a man who died of a heart attack six years ago. He's wearing Reebok Premiers and nylon shorts and the brown and gold wind shirt of the Memorial High Running Badgers.

“I'll get there,” Lisa says. “I just won't set the record.” Coach is the only dead person who talks to her. Lisa has never been able to get him to say anything important, although she's still trying. “How are you feeling, Coach?”

He shakes his hands loose in front of him as he marks time beside her. “You know.”

Billy Ward was Lisa's track and cross-country coach and he is one of the only reasons she survived her senior year. He didn't care that kids thought she was weird; all he cared about was that she could run a mile in 5:11. After she graduated, Lisa used to see him all the time around town but they rarely met on the run. She liked to work out in the morning and he preferred afternoons, a habit left over from three decades of after school practice. She has told him several times that she's sorry she missed his funeral. He just shrugs.

“Want company?” he says. “Where you headed?”

“All downhill from here.”

“Always the wiseass.” He takes off down the other side of Bride's Hill Road.

They trot easily, shoulder to shoulder. Coach Ward runs slower than Lisa would like, but she lets him set the pace. He cuts off onto Aberdeen, which drops down the steepest part of Oak Hill.

“Race you to the stop sign.” Coach isn't even breathing hard.

Suddenly they are galloping, each long stride a rebuke to gravity. The houses flash by. Lisa glances over at Coach and recognizes the expression of fierce joy on his face. This is his classic training strategy: speed play. Interspersed through each practice run must come several bouts of sprinting. He always made a distinction between running and jogging. Jogging is a mental activity. You do it because you ought to. Running is a physical activity. You do it because there is no choice. Ought doesn't win races. You win the race because there's a tiger chasing you or because you absolutely have to get home in time or maybe just because it's a beautiful day and you're seventeen and life is impossibly sweet. Coach no longer looks sixty-eight. He is seventeen all the way to the bottom of the hill.

Lisa can feel the bulk of the entire planet in her knees as she slows to the stop sign on Howell. She and Coach arrive at the stop sign together, but he slaps his open hand to it a beat before she does. "Don't stop, Schoonover," he says, bouncing in place, his feet never leaving the sidewalk. "Never stop." They eye each other, breathing hard and grinning. This is where they must part. She has to get ready for work. He's buried in Old St. Mary's. She has put flowers on his grave several times since the first time he appeared to her.

Crispin pulls up behind them and reaches over Lisa's shoulder to tap the stop sign. Coach stares at him with his usual disapproval and Crispin retreats to a respectful distance.

"You still have the legs, Coach," says Lisa. "I hope I'm still sprinting like that when I'm your age. How old are you anyway?"

"Seventy-four on November fifteenth."

"And you were what, sixty-eight, when you died? They still keep track of birthdays in heaven?"

Billy Ward licks his forefinger and draws a check mark in the air. "See you, Schoonover." He winks at her and a smile lights his craggy face. "Don't forget to stretch."

"Will do, Coach." Lisa waves and takes off for home.

Lisa has lost six jobs in five years, although a couple of the layoffs weren't her fault. Dolly Hitchens had closed Best Kept Secrets when she got divorced and Carlson's Hardware burned down. These days Lisa works at the DVDeal on Grandview at the Dover end of the Squamscott Bridge, although business is ominously slow. But that's where she met Matt, who will sit through just about any movie about sports. When Lisa quoted Annie's speech from *Bull Durham*—his all-time favorite—about the Church of Baseball, Matt asked her out on the spot.

Lisa had started at the DVDeal just a week after she had checked herself out of the Kirkwood Center at Mercy Hospital, where she had spent the best part of June having her head dry-cleaned. Lisa and reality had briefly parted company the

Thursday before the Memorial Day weekend. She was working the classified ad desk at the *Dover Times-Advocate*. She had planned to head out for lunch, but as she passed the microfilm room, Crispin stopped, lingering at the door. This was new. Crispin was a follower; he never took the lead. She backtracked. The windowless room was empty except for two Canon microfilm readers and a wall filled with filing cabinets. And then she had the feeling. It was a little like a chill and a little like being tipsy and a little like déjà vu. She knew it was exactly the wrong thing to do, but she brushed by Crispin into the archive, opened the drawer labeled 1960-65 and pulled the spool that held the *Times-Advocate* for March 11, 1964. She scrolled to the front page. At the bottom right, under articles about Queen Elizabeth's new baby and Henry Cabot Lodge's win in the New Hampshire primary and the debate over choosing the national flower was the headline: DOVER MAN KILLED IN CRASH. According to the story, Louis Schoonover, age thirty-four, of 9 Bank Street, had died when his Ford Galaxie had crossed the median on Route 22 up in Reed City and struck an oncoming Pontiac Catalina driven by Sophie Krusek, age seventeen, of Upper Shad Road, Reed City. Both Miss Krusek and her brother, Brice Krusek, age eight, were pronounced dead at the scene. Mr. Schoonover succumbed to his injuries later that day. The story went on to say that Mr. Schoonover's daughter Lisa, age six, had also been injured in the accident but was in stable condition and was expected to recover.

Expected to recover. She didn't look up, but she knew Crispin was watching her.

Lisa's mother had never said anything about the Kruseks. Annette Schoonover had told Lisa that her father's Galaxie had skidded on a patch of ice and hit a tree. But in that moment, the sickly glow of the reader's screen burned away the lie that had poisoned her life. It all made sense now. Crispin must be one of the dead people, like all the others. His name must be Brice Krusek. He must have been haunting her all these years because her father had killed him and his sister. She spun away from the microfilm reader to find Crispin leaning against the far wall.

"That's it, isn't it?" she said. "That's why we're here?"

He gazed at her with empty eyes.

"I know your secret now, Brice."

He wasn't giving her anything.

"This means you're free. We can be done."

He had never given her anything.

"Do you hear me?" Of course he could. She was screaming; everyone in the building could hear her. "It was an accident."

Crispin yawned.

“Leave me alone,” she shrieked. “Leave me.” People began to crowd around her, but she couldn’t tell which of them were living and which were dead.

As she trots toward Howell Junior High, Lisa decides to take the long way home. For some reason, Crispin closes the gap between them until he is only a few steps behind. Lisa still thinks of him as Crispin, rather than Brice. She has accepted that there is no way she can know for sure that he was the boy in the other car. Lisa skirts the perimeter of the soccer field and dodges behind the six rows of bleachers that face the football field and the new track oval. When she rounds the bleachers at the forty-yard line, she spots her mother doing a slow lap. This is only the second time Lisa has seen her. The first time she had just caught a glimpse of her mother from across the Squamscott River.

Her mother is wearing the faded blue jersey with USA in red letters that she had worn in the Rome Olympics. She was always so proud to have been an Olympian, even though she’d finished dead last in her preliminary heat in the 200 meters. Her favorite story while she was alive was how in that very same heat, the great Wilma Rudolph kicked her way into the finals and a world record. “Wilma was running so hard, I was lucky she didn’t lap me.” She liked to laugh at herself, her mother did, especially when she was drinking. Her story would always end like this: “And you know what Wilma’s time was? Twenty-four seconds flat. There’s a sophomore in high school in Minneapolis who runs a 23.9. Imagine, a sophomore. So don’t you listen when they say kids these days are no good.” When Lisa was in college, she’d gone into the stacks at the library and discovered an old *Life* magazine with pictures of Wilma Rudolph winning this race. Lisa’s mother wasn’t in any of them. It turned out that she had run in a different heat. And it wasn’t a world record; Rudolph only set an Olympic record. Lisa had never corrected her mother, even though she sat through the Wilma Rudolph story many, many more times before her mother died. She could never bring herself to call her on the lie.

Lisa glides effortlessly around the Poly-Mat track, catches up to her mother and slows to match her shuffling pace. She does not appear to notice Lisa. Instead she stares down at the red polyurethane surface of the track as if searching for a lost dime. Lisa can see grapy veins under her wax paper skin. Strands of gray hair have flown loose from the bun that is held in place by her favorite silver hair fork. Her mother ran right up until the end. She probably would’ve preferred to drop dead on the track rather than to have wasted to a stick in the hospital.

“Mom, it’s me.” Lisa doesn’t know how being dead works, but if Billy Ward can talk to her, then maybe her mother can too. Just then Crispin races past them, gets a lead of maybe twenty feet and then starts running backward, facing them.

“Mom,” says Lisa, “you know now. You must. About Crispin. Everything.” Even though they are moving at a crawl, Lisa is gasping for breath. “I’m a mess. I try, but he’s always there. Always.”

Her mother is making a small, moist rasping sound as she jogs. *He-he-heep.*

Lisa has a thousand questions but her entire miserable life seems stuck in her throat. “*Maa?*”

Her mother shakes her head and continues to plod on.

Lisa stops then, although this goes against everything her mother taught her about running. You never stop unless you’re hurt or someone needs your help. Stopping means that you’re not a serious person, that your will is weak, your spirit flawed. Lisa expects the certain rebuke, but her mother has moved on. Annette Schoonover passes Crispin, who now runs in place, studying Lisa.

Suddenly Lisa is on her knees. Then on her elbows. Then her forehead is pressing against the nubby surface of the track. Sobs bubble out of her. It isn’t fair. Crispin won’t go away. The DVDeal will close. Matt will leave. She isn’t strong enough. Nobody can help. She’ll wind up in Kirkwood again. And die in an asylum, with Crispin watching.

There is a feather tingle at the small of her back and Lisa jerks upright. Her mother has slogged an entire circuit around the track and come up behind her. Padding in place, she offers Lisa a hand. Lisa reaches for it but there is nothing for her to hold on to. Her mother shakes her head again and gives her a sad smile.

“Don’t stop,” Annette Schoonover says and then slides around her daughter and begins another slow lap.

Lisa hauls herself up, even though it feels as if there is a Saint Bernard on her shoulders. And suddenly the track seems tilted up at a sharp angle. Still, she staggers after her mother. She has it in her mind to catch up to her but on the curve ahead of Lisa, Annette Schoonover is scattering into the twilight. Her legs are mist and the blue jersey goes up in smoke and puffs toward the bleachers. The letters U, S, and A are as faint as Lisa’s memories of her father and the silver hair fork is the last gleam of the dying day. And then her mother is gone and Lisa is alone.

With Crispin.

He watches her come toward him, his expression unreadable as always. As she passes him, she lashes out at his face, her fingers spread and curled. It’s a slashing blow that would have raked bloody lines across his cheek, but there is no more to Crispin than there is to Annette Schoonover. You can’t touch the dead, Lisa thinks. And they can’t touch you. She veers off the track and sprints between the bleachers. Crispin has to hustle to keep up.

Lisa finishes the run with a last spurt of speed and breaks the imaginary finish line at the corner of Bank and Coronet. As she bends over to catch her breath, she catches a glimpse of Mrs. Grapelli on the porch of her house, leaning back on her wicker rocking chair. Only now the house belongs to the Silvermans. Mrs. Grapelli, dead for more than three decades, looks like one of those mummies you see in old issues of *National Geographic*.

Lisa walks down Bank, drinking in her drowsy neighborhood. Her mother's house—her house now—is eighth on the left, a light blue Cape with navy shutters and a center brick chimney. As is her habit, she walks around the house three times, cooling down. She brushes her hand across the flat heads of the scarlet sedum and picks a spoon-flowered chrysanthemum and tucks it behind her ear. She notices that Matt has mowed the lawn for her.

She climbs the porch steps two at a time and lets the screen door slam in Crispin's face. She pauses in the front hall at the entrance to the living room. The message light on her answering machine is flashing. She presses *play*.

"Hi sweetie, it's just me," says Matt's voice. Even on the tinny speaker of the answering machine, he sounds steady. Someone she could lean on. "I stopped by twice, hoping to catch you, but you were out. Probably running, since it rained this morning. I mowed your lawn while I was waiting."

"Thanks," Lisa says to the machine.

"Lisa, I'm worried about you. About us. We've hardly spoken in the last few days. Every time I call, I get your machine. I'm thinking maybe you're screening my calls." He laughs nervously.

"I'm sorry, Matt." She did screen two of his calls yesterday.

"And when I come into the store, all we talk about are the movies. Have I done something wrong? I just want us to be together. I know you're probably not ready, what with all your ... ah ... stuff."

Stuff. Crispin is standing in the entrance to the living room, watching her. His hands are braced against the doorjambs.

The answering machine crackles. It sounds like a cough. Or a sigh. Then there is a long silence and Lisa thinks maybe the message is over, except that she doesn't hear a beep. Finally Matt clears his throat and says, "I love you, Lisa, but I'm not sure now that you love me. And that's important, isn't it? You have to be ready. So if you want, I can stop."

"No," she says, glaring into Crispin's dead eyes. "Don't stop." She gulps air as if she's running again, only now it's like that flying, out-of-control sprint with Coach Ward down Oak Hill. Because there *is* a tiger chasing her and she absolutely *has* to get home. But her mother's house isn't where she belongs.

Lisa has no choice. She picks up the phone.

Copyright © 2007 James Patrick Kelly