

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

*Joseph Cummins*  
**Reindeer Run**

THE RUNNERS FORMED INTO LOOSE LINES SEVEN OR EIGHT ABREAST, jostling forward and tightening up ranks as the snow began falling in earnest. To Baker's left was a high school girl dressed entirely in elf clothes except for her running shoes and green plastic reindeer antlers. Despite this she seemed serious and quite intent, a flicker of annoyance crossing her face when she felt him looking at her.

An airhorn sounded and the pack moved fitfully forward through the school parking lot and out onto an asphalt road, old farmland behind a stone fence to their right, a 1970's-era subdivision to their left.

Since his divorce, it had become Baker's habit to pick 5ks in distant towns, drive to them, and enter the race. Running in the midst of people he had never seen before and would never see again, he imagined himself ordained by anonymity, a wandering holy stranger. Occasionally he won age group medals and the puzzled smatter of applause, as he stepped up for his plastic trophy, pleased him. He supposed he was attempting to recreate his youth as an all-state high school miler back in Michigan, driving with his coach—a chain-smoking local newspaper reporter with a flattop crewcut and a stopwatch dangling from a shoestring around his neck—to meets in small towns hidden deep in the northern evergreen forests, each with its own ancient high school, memorial plaques to Korean War dead just inside the front lobbies. Cinder tracks, strange girls, their eyes on him. He liked to pull the tape toward him as he won, a little tug to bring the finish closer.

The breeze came up colder and harder and the snow blew down through the bare branches of the trees, but Baker ran easily, quickly passing those who had taken off too fast, the panting ten-year-olds and the adults who had been calling to each other about how hungover they were. He followed the elf girl left into the subdivision and uphill on a street lined with split-levels and colonials. The trees were tall but still looked blandly new, no stately oaks or crowned maples. Scattered groups of people stood at the ends of driveways and applauded. In a few minutes, the street turned to the right and leveled off and Baker passed the one-mile mark, where a high school kid called out splits from his phone. The time was faster than he usually ran at the beginning of a race, especially uphill, but the elf girl was ahead, separated from him by ten yards, and it seemed to him that all he had to do was follow her. There were times, running in these strange towns, when Baker felt ecstatic, and he was feeling a little bit that way now. It was Christmas morning and no one here knew him or could call him out in judgement. And the snow was falling. As they rounded a corner he glanced behind and saw the straggling line of struggling reindeer, antlers bobbing up and down, as if through a gauzy veil.

He forced himself to pick up speed as the black asphalt, dusted with snow and covered with overlapping footprints, curved uphill once again. The race was taking him along the crest of a ridge above the town. This part of the subdivision felt like a little village all to itself, cut off from the rest, a suburb of a suburb, and there were no spectators—it was as if news of the Reindeer Run hadn't breached the wall of their solitude. He could

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see, through their kitchen windows, families gathered around their Christmas breakfasts. The pack of runners had thinned out and antlers littered the snowy street. He searched in vain for the elf girl, but he was running alone now, for blocks at a time. On the left were woods—there were always woods in these '70s subs—several hundred yards worth of grim scrub brush. The sky darkened and the snow settled in for the long haul, falling monotonously. It speckled his black gloves, dampened his ears. He never wore sweatpants, even on cold days, and the fine grey hairs of his legs were flecked with white.

There was no one calling splits at the two-mile mark, just a small sandwich sign with the number 2 on it leaning crookedly against a tree. A lone figure ran up ahead and he saw that it was the elf girl, starting to labor, her antlers tilting forward. When he was some yards behind, she heard him, glanced back, and sped up, unwilling to cede ground. In the same instant two young men raced past him, pumping their elbows. He looked behind and saw other runners emerging from the curtain of snow, bearing down on him. From the distance came the sound of cheering and faint applause and he tried to accelerate. His legs were heavy and achy, but the trick was to find your form, to step into it as if it were a shadow self, and live only in form, without thought.

This portion of the subdivision, apparently the last to be constructed, had larger homes with two-story great halls and through the upstairs windows of one of them he saw a teardrop chandelier, its lights glittering. The sound of applause became louder as the street wound down off the ridge. Up ahead, runners turned at the stone fence that enclosed the farmlands and headed back towards the finish as a race marshal windmilled his arms and pointed the direction. The energy of the race amped up and more runners darted past him. Spectators clustered at the turn, shouting and clapping, and one little boy caught his eye and cried in a reedy voice: "It's all downhill from here!"

This was the kind of thing that people often shouted at the ends of races, but in this case it was true. After Baker made the turn, the road sloped sharply downward and the town spread out before him through the thickly falling snow—the town hall, the little shopping strip, the school and its parking lot, the spire of the church.

Racing hard now with the wind and snow in his face, Baker passed reindeer after reindeer, their cheeks flushed, eyes wild. Rock music played, loud, and the crowd lined the road shouting and screaming. He rounded the final turn and felt his muscles constrict as he pumped his arms and legs with everything he had. He could see the finish line 100 yards away, the digital timer with its relentless blink of numbers, the banner that said *Reindeer Run* flapping above, but found that the end of the race was pulling away from him, and understood that no matter how hard he pumped, how fast he sprinted, there would be no finishing this thing at all. Then he was there and the elf girl gave him a startled glance as he pushed past her at the line.