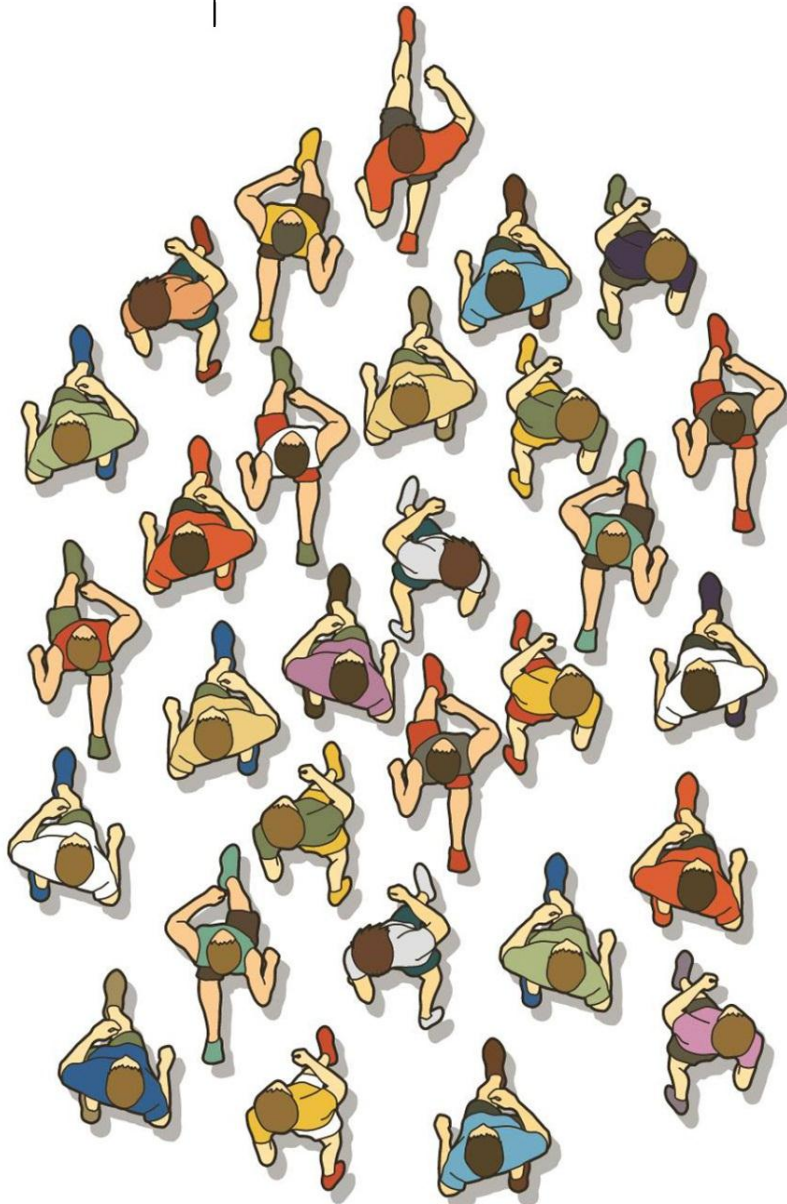




What's Waiting
Behind
the Finish Line





What's Waiting Behind the Finish Line

Viroj Suttisima

At the 33rd Kilometer

Bikhila was among the group of leading runners. No one expected that he could have been running this far.

At two kilometers before was the city center where Crawling Tiger Hill stood upright. Another name for this hill in a cursed tone called "Hell Hill". Its towering height was like a beast's palm crushing over the exhausted runners. Only the strongest ones could survive. After passing the tough way, they ran downhill and turned right passing the lofty building where the government propaganda sign was shown.

After passing the curve, they found the long ramp straightforward to the finish line. Now it was too innocent to think that the runners survived and could run smoothly from now on until reaching the finish line. As soon as the runners swerved, the burning sunlight in the late morning shone upon them which increased the temperature of the strong competition.

Among the group of runners, some bent down their head, some squinted, or lowered a glimpse. Meditation was merged with energy from their thighs which gradually declined along the way. The crowd of spectators were standing along both sides behind the fence. They shouted and cheered all the sturdy runners. Some showed the signs with messages of persons' names and political quotes. It seemed that the moment of critical decision for who would be the winner or loser depending on the support from the masses, so the runners in the running field were so-called "people's runners".

Bikhila was a young, dark, skinned boy. His eyes expression was not innocent like anyone else in the rural village. Someone defined him that "It seems he is thinking about something all the time". Perhaps it was because he always spent his quiet time in the small village library. He already had read all of the books there. As he tried to find the meaning of his ruin life, he became a skeptical and thoughtful person.

He ran at a steady pace, positioned himself hiding at the back of the group while listening carefully. To compete with the national leading runners, the runners were

required to apply full of their strategies and always outsmarted each other. Definitely, something must happen, but no one could tell exactly when it would happen.

Among of the noise of cheers and claps along the road, the panting sound was louder than that of the footsteps. It meant that someone in the group could not endure with the extreme speed.

“You must listen carefully.” Coach Simbene had ever told him during training. “Think as if you’re a lion waiting for mauling its prey. Remember...just wait.”

“Like those troops who wait for suitable time and then attack us?” he suddenly asked.

“No, that’s a mistake.” his coach suddenly answered with an irritable tone of voice and then swiftly calmed down. “Don’t think about it again, just do good practice. Remember, you must be the first who passes the finish line.”

He grinned to show acceptance like other villagers usually did.

At the 35th Kilometer

Predatory instinct instructed Bikhila to leave the last position in the group of 8. He speeded up until becoming the vanguard. His strength deriving from training made everything easier than expected. As the leader of the game, he accelerated to overcome other fatigue runners in the group. They gradually surrendered and were left behind.

“Let them taste the torture at the 35th kilometer, beat them! so you can do anything you want.” echoed the voice in his head. He had ever heard someone mentioned the devil at the 35th kilometer. Whisper from the fatigue made someone like a car with a blown radiator supporting themselves to be able to run forward. They were exhausted. They got muscle pain from the nape muscle, clavicle, body, to the leg muscle. Although they continued running, they ran without speed and exchanged for pain like a thousand needles stabbed them.

Amateur runners wanted to end this absurd torture. The professional runners also did not want to force their bodies to find the glimmer of victory. When there was no meaning in the weakest time; therefore, they were willing to become losers who could not touch the finish line at the end.

“Marathon is a game of waiting. You should be patient until you see an opportunity. But you must be ensured that the opportunity comes at the right time.” his coach’s statement still echoed in his head. “More importantly, you must be reminded that others also find this opportunity like you.”

The word “opportunity” had a lot to do with Bikhila. One day, he began to think that it was not just an opportunity to win in the competition, but it meant the opportunity to claim justice to the village as well.

After being the leader of the group, he was so proud of his best choice of opportunity. He imagined the headlines on the next morning newspaper mentioned the dark horse of the competition who defeated all frontrunners. How did the news reporter define him? *Hillbilly Winner*, *Rising Star*, *Champion from the Forgotten Village*. *From Dust to Challenger*. He preferred the last two ones.

While thinking, he wiped sweat away from his forehead and pulled his singlet to ventilate the humidity. He looked at the sky ahead. Today, the weather was terrible but it fitted him. It might be the last time to attack his competitors. He must speed up to leave them behind.

Suddenly, someone’s leg touched him as he whipped his foot.

It happened suddenly and unexpectedly, Bikhila fell down and slid forward lightly bumping into a runner and then both of them lay down on the ground. This happened in not quite a long period of time but he felt like eternity. The sight was almost cut and became darkness when he used his arms to support and press on the ground. At the same moment, he glanced at someone’s tricky smile among the remaining runners who were speeding away.

The track and field official wearing a reflective vest together with the guard soldiers ran toward him. He uncomfortably pushed himself to get up. He felt pain in his arms and elbows. The color of dried blood blended with his dark brown skin but it was prominent on the white singlet. While stepping forward to run again made him slightly painful, but the real hurt was caused by his very few experiences which became silly clumsiness and almost brought him lose.

Both sides were the vague image of cheering crowd of spectators. In front of him were his competitors who were around a hundred meters far away. In a quick glance,

he saw his villagers with the innocent looks but when looking deeply in their eyes' expressions, they reflected unexplainable suffer.

At the 1st Kilometer

Bikhila's village was located on Mount Thirunech. It was a mesa with tiny shrubs. Soil mass covered with dust and scorching sun made this place became a barren land. A well with a hand pump and electric generator were provided by villagers from around 100 households. The villagers here were poor and their only one vehicle was a tumbledown pick-up truck. The Head of Village always drove it through the dust to deliver rice and other necessary items to the village and parked it for emergency use.

In every morning, dozens of children walked in line along the non-asphalt road down the hill from the village. The first part of the road sloping down could be labor-saving then it sloped up again. The small children called this kind of road "Teenagers' Way". It meant that whoever could walk continuously to the top and then walked down to the other side of the mountain, then walked pass the distantly arid grassland to the other village, they were strong enough to be the main manpower of the village.

5-kilometer distance from the village to school was very far for many children, but it was the jogging track in the morning and evening for Bikhila. No one knew why a quiet boy like him was so much crazy in jogging. Falling down and scrambling up were common for him and made him stronger. Day by day he became a village runner. He changed his jogging track to be harder. He joined cross-field running competition and became famous in the area.

Unfortunately, before he attended the youth championship competition of not more than 15 years of age, the name of this village had silently and brutally disappeared.

General Mutambe chased the armed rebels to the mountain near Thirunech Village.

During the twilight to the night when everyone wished to forget, the culprits perceived by the government officers disappeared. The officers had been seeking them for hour but could not find anyone until darkness fell over. They thought that the rebels might flee and hide in the village, so they had been seeking them almost all night but found no one.

It seemed that the government officers fully believed that the rebels and villagers were the same group and the villagers helped them to find the hiding places.

“They might be in some holes under the shrubs.” assumed Head of the Deployment Unit. “The hole under the floor also might be possible.” That group was sitting quietly waiting near the village like the beasts were waiting for their victims to be complacent. When they were sure that threat did not work, they suppressed the nonexistent outlaws. The dazzling flashlight and the roar gun shooting sound reverberantly for around ten minutes were still in everyone’s memory. Everyone felt the bitter taste in the throat when each was reminded by the event. The backcountry village was almost completely destroyed that night. Old buildings and appliances were in broken condition. Their financial value seemed not much but they were valuable for someone’s memory.

Moreover, dozens of young men had to sacrifice their lives to the negligence on purpose. The old men and children including Bikhila’s uncle were extremely shocked with unexpected riot and tragedy. The young man who usually was not so talkative had not talked to anyone for around a month. Finally, he started talking again asking a political question to his running coach. The reason he had never told anyone was the strange sound echoed in his head.

It was proven that no rebel hid here. Instead of remedy or apology, government left the destroyed village disappeared from people of the whole country. Government never helped or mentioned it in any media or statement. It seemed that the government pretended to forget what happened.

“That’s the boy from the mountain village.” the greetings brought Bikhila back to the start line of the national marathon race. He turned to bow his head greeting Khipsaeng, the national team runner who came from the same region as him. This man was the role model of many people in the country. He started from being the local runner of the rural area who had hard-working practice, until he became a super-star runner. “Keep fighting, one day you can be a people’s runner.”

Bikhila grinned in the villagers’ style of response. He looked over Khipsaeng’s shoulder. He was a bit surprised to see the security guard military officers more than usual.

“This is not the place for the rising star.” Hadiz, a sturdy runner from the north, showed up. “None of the teenager on Crawling Tiger Hill can compete with the senior runners, being the one of the top twenty is very amazing”. This guy liked using psychological tactics with his fellow runners and it really worked.

“Although you can overcome them, continued the sturdy young man, you have to compete with him, the hell speedy runner.” He turned to the runner who stood with arms akimbo and eyes closed. His name was Dediza, the best runner of the year. He was very tall deserving his nickname of “Walking Tall”. His strong fine motor was a good evidence to show his physical fitness.

Apart from the mentioned three runners, there were several runners from the south who were ready to compete for the championship. Bikhila never apprehended. He had practiced starting from waking up at five in the morning and running strictly to schedule assigned by his coach. The secret behind his strength was that he daily walked to school up and down along the hill for 10 kilometers. He started with the cross-country steeplechase race, so he was confident in his ability of running on slopes. Now, he never thought that running on the road in the city with some slopes was difficult.

Finally, it was the time for competition. The starter signaled and the runners leaned forward...

That sound resonated. *Leave the competition, walk to the starter line.* He had tolerated the resonant in his head for a long time. *Turn back, clench a fist in the black gloves, and stretch it out to the sky, that's so cool!* He shook his head to get rid of the repetitive whisper. His plan of protest demanding attention never disappeared. *Show them, your opportunity comes.*

His conscience made him hesitate. He worked so hard that he could not let the political expression ruin his dream of being a famous runner. Why did he come so far to allow the starter dragging him away?

“Only fools who practice to death ask to be the surrender.” Coach Simbene used to tell him.

“Isn't that a tactic to victory?” he asked curiously. “Because at the end, those people will listen to us.”

The big old man sighed and leaned closer, “Listen, young boy” he put his hand on his shoulder gently. “You cannot mix the results of one story with another, you run to win, not to defeat the government.”

Bikhila leaned forward, prepared for the chaos in the wave of runners during the starting period. He repeated in his mind that the runner's duty was to run.

He imagined the life behind the finish line.

At the 21st Kilometer

Halfway through, the weather was getting hot. Humidity made his singlet soak. The sweat droplets on his arms splashed in rhythm of his swing. After this, the past exhaustion would overwhelm the rest of the time with increasing fatigue of the body. But it was just a small matter for the leading runners. Bikhila was still in a good position. His muscles and respiratory system also worked like a brand-new machine.

Each runner has similar running postures. The top runners flicked each leg up higher than their buttocks, then swung it back with full foot on the ground, and then flicked it up again quickly. Viewed from the side, it looked like these runners drew their feet into a circle like a wheel that spun forward. Anyone who started panting, their legs would not be lifted so high and staggered.

Coach Simbene always emphasized that running alone along the way during the competition made the runners imbalance their forces and also faced with the wind resistance. But when the group was created, the rhythm of running would happen regularly. There was a human wall blocking the wind at the speed at which air mass began to become the enemy. Sometimes people surrounding us might be able to help when we had an accident or picked up the drinking water bottle and missed it.

“You listen, this is like a civilized person’s way of doing things, we call it group survival strategy. It’s useless that many people gather as a group but they do each of their own job. Let’s go hand in hand for better benefits.” the old man’s running technique resonated in his head.

“A large crowd of people joined together. It was the way people call it democracy, wasn’t it?” he asked as he started jogging together. He looked up in the sky which was clear and slightly cloudy.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? If everyone agrees with each other and goes together.” the other party replied and grinned.

“So, why in the final time, all runners don’t run to the finish line together instead of running alone?” It sounded like getting on one’s nerves but Bikhila did not appear to be disturbing at all.

Coach Simbene slowed down, so the other party also reduced his speed to stop and listen to him.

“Because that’s the race, don’t forget that everyone is an individual. Life is one’s own and has one’s own goal but on the way we can walk together hand in hand.”

As the old coach said, after working together at some distances, all runners would change into the killing mode. They tried to find the way getting rid of all competitors. This was not a betrayal but it was the custom in the game which everyone had been familiar with. It was enough for stepping on others’ footprints, it was the time to leave our own footprints. Who did not want to win?

The runners split over the distance. They ran in group of 30 runners at first but now less than 20 runners left. All runners bowed slightly, concentrated on the road, glanced at the trunks and legs of the runners in front of them and at the shoulders and elbows of the runners next to them. All remained silent, listening to the breath sound of other runners. They were waiting like a predator lion.

At the 25th Kilometer

Even if they ran together in group along the way, the runners often felt alone. They were distracted, especially, the boy from the remote area. The city he saw, rows of buildings, bushes along the way even the people who came out clinging to the fence shouted to encourage them. All made him homesick.

Bikhila was still thinking about the story in the book he had ever read. He reminded the loneliness of the long-distance runner. The young thief in England who was at the same age as him was taken into the correction house. Time passed with the burnt running time. Let the talent encouraged working-class guys to become the rising star of the distance running and the favorites of the executives in the institution. Whoever knew of which was the way to move toward the bright future, anyway, what was in the depth of our heart always directed us. He felt that a part of his life was confined, suffered, frustrated, and alienated.

Sometimes the pictures of two young men overlapped. Bikhila thought that he himself was not different from that young Smith. The bright future contrasted with the sediment in his heart. According to the short story, if the young man won the important competition, indeed, he could upgrade to be an elite. He was strong and versatile runner

everyone had ever seen during his practice. He passed almost to the end of the path, then split from other rival runners with incomparable durability and speed. The story plot had twist ending when the finish line was just in front of him. Instead, he made a shocking and infuriating decision by stopping there.

For Bikhila, this was an important scene in his teenage life. He embraced loss which was the return of freedom of not having to indulge anyone else.

“But that is a rebellion. It’s a kind of protest. You have to learn by yourself whether you should do it or not.” his coach who was also his uncle’s friend had ever warned him. “That guy doesn’t want to be a part of the mischievous crowd, but sometimes you should not humiliate others either.”

Bikhila started thinking of the finish line in the city center. How the taste of victory here would be.

Protest them, present the sign to be seen, there is no better chance. The same voice flashed in his head. If he really did that, the finish line would turn him into the political hero of the village.

At the 32nd Kilometer

Crawling Tiger Hill was the hill of selection which left only the strongest runners. The body which had fought for more than 30 kilometers confronted with the steep slope which made the legs weaker. The weaker were like chased beasts. All sturdy runners felt the smell of fierce battle.

From the first hundred meters, all runners had faced with steep slopes. Hadiz, Dediza and Khipsaeng had eye contact among others for a moment before speeding up to overtake other competitors who hid their fatigues. After that less than half a kilometer, the spectators on both of the roadsides saw the runners were gradually left behind the group.

Finally, only 8 runners left.

The top three of the competition glanced at the passengers in the running train. Then they stumbled a little when saw that Bikhila and them were neck and neck. Another four powers in the group also surprisingly looked at him. But if they asked people in Thirunech Village, no one would doubt. He had been practicing up and down hill running for all his life, so this young boy became an unparalleled all-terrain expert runner.

Bikhila did not feel any difficulty when he had to keep up with the speed of the leaders on the slopes. In contrast, he began thinking of splitting off the group to beat them, or if he accompanied the group, he was confident that he consumed less energy than others. When reaching the last kilometer, he extremely accelerated his speed and left the competitors far behind.

When thinking about the finish line, some of his memories reflected the image of the morning of sabotage in Boston. The explosion in marathon race was called terrorism by people in the democratic world. But a group of people who agreed with brutal actions called it a symbol of the elimination of inequality and oppression instead.

His coach knew he was passionate about such stories, so he always interrupted, “That’s not our way. That’s what the extremists do. What will you get back from revenge? It’s not different from labeling in front of the village that “Please kill us one more time.”

By that time Bikhila grew up to become an 18-year-old young man who was intelligent as same as the students in the town. He began to argue, “If let it be like this, when will the government apologize us? Nobody wants to listen to the villagers’ voice like us. It’s not fun enough.”

“If you think that such a protest will get people’s attention, you are right. But it will cause the endless conflicts. It’s called pouring the oil to the burning fire which is likely extinguished.” his coach argued.

“Even if I got an Olympic medal, they just perceived that I was the winner in sports. But if I had a symbolic protest, they would start to pay attention to our past problems and make it more scandalous.” His eyes became more aggressive and different from his expression as a little boy of yesterday.

“But you are abusing all people who are involved in sport competitions.”

In the distraction during overcoming “Hell Hill”, he saw all African American heroes who wore black gloves during receiving Olympic medals. It was our pride, but perceived by white people as scandal. Or even the picture that brought tears to his eyes every time he thought about. The picture of the moment when a senior African marathon runner made a sign of the cross on his chest protesting their government at the finish line. Afterwards, he had to escape because the leader of the country was so angry and found some ways to punish him.

This might be why the Ministry of Sports announced an absolute ban on the political symbolic expression. Everyone must respect the rules of having rights to express political opinions except in the area of competition. Athletes who had any political expressions must be abstained from the competition for penalty. But Bikhila always thought it might be worthy if this was an important occasion to deliver a message. He would not feel sorry if it could redeem the fairness to his village.

On the other hand, it also meant losing opportunity to get the large amount of money reward which could be spent for developing the village. He felt like walking on the crossroads. One way was victory for repairing the beloved village. Another way was to give a sign letting people know, at least it could heal the feelings of the villagers.

Bikhila had no idea when he seemed to control the situation in a few kilometers ahead. Something that was not clear whether an accident or intent caused him tumble and let the competitors speed up their running far away from him. Several years later, he was still not sure about that. But it was always clear that the way to the right victory was always full of roughness even the smoothest road.

At the 40th Kilometer

Dediza could not believe in what his eyes saw as he accelerated his extreme speed passing the 40th kilometer sign and only two kilometers left.

After increasing his speed at the drinking water receiving point at the 38th kilometer. Other runners in the group became slow moving picture backwards. No one could compete against Dediza's final running speed. From now on, he was the only one who was moving legs steadily. What separating the tall young man from the victory remained only the two-kilometer long road ahead.

Hadiz and Khipsaeng ran in tandem around 2 blocks behind him. Their weariness left them almost no more formidable speed. Although they had no hope to win, they still had a mission to cooperate for keeping running rhythm to be the 1st and 2nd runners-up. At least, it would be honorable to receive medals on the podium.

It seemed that the situation was all tightly fixed. Even Bikhila seemed to leave the game but then returned to appear in the scene with a determined look which no one had ever seen before. When he overtook both of them, he was like a mountain demon haunting the weak. His speed was too high to chase. This made Hadiz and Khipsaeng felt little frightened

before turning to fight each other in another battle in order to steal the last space on the podium.

Knowing that there was a dark horse chasing after him, Dediza ran quickly from the left to the right when he glanced at someone at the distant shadow a few meters away. A shielding skill making the competitors lose control and have to run around had ever worked last year. And he could reach the finish line with his last effort.

But Bikhila did not care about the obstacles. He ran around the competitors in front of him. He did not care about a longer distance. His eyes were staring at the finish line far away. His legs moved widely with constantly rapid speed and powerful as a machine. At some point, he saw a track and field official in a reflective vest standing and talking with a man in camouflage who carried a gun at the edge of a fence. Both of them smiled at him. His legs did not stop, neither did his thoughts. The destroyed village appeared in his memory like a movie screen set. Everyone's little smiles faded as well as the bloodstains of the innocents. All things that represented the bonds were all burnt out in the harsh violence. The more Bikhila thought, the faster and more stressful he moved his legs than usual.

That picture faded away in just only a few breaths. He found himself overtaking the last competitor for a very long way. The finish line waited for him at 100 meters ahead. When he glanced back, no one came closer to his sight at all.

How are the feelings of the people who sabotaged the Boston Marathon? Well, what about the young Smith of the loneliness of the long-distance runner? That's so cool to declare freedom for the whole city to see, isn't it?

He looked at both sides of the road, started thinking about slowing down.

At the 45th Kilometer

Coach Simbene passed away three months before the national competition had started. His funeral was simply held in a cemetery in the east of the village. The villagers here knew him very well, so many of them attended his funeral. Bikhila took this opportunity to survey large trees lining next to the houses, where the bullet marks remained. Next to it was the slope he ran down joyfully during his childhood. Then, when he grew up, he changed his training field to the other side of the village because he needed to practice on the harder way.

Bikhila ran slowly along with his reminiscent past. The rugged happy road with the grasslands on both sides were winded and bathed in sunlight. The school students were running with familiar smiles. Then, his past blended with present. His feet still touched the ground and flicked up as a steady running pace.

The sunlight still shined on his face. He did not hear the announcer's voice confirming the name list of top three winners. He did not know about the meeting confirming the results which complied with the rules. He did not listen to the names who received the inscription and the prize money.

At that time, he did not know that TV began live reporting the excitement during the final period. It was the fiercest and most bewildered battle over years. Sports reporters had been busy in searching for the new sources. Everyone wanted the stories of today's champion to write the news articles; especially the stories of the village which had been forgotten.

Bikhila ran passing the finish line very far away. He slowed down his speed a little before passing the finish line without stopping. There was no resistance, no bombing, and no terrorism. No one has to be offended at all. He would be the people's runner as it should be. But just one thing, did not let him be the one who were too easily predictable.

Previously, the staff team half-walked and half-ran, bringing him an athlete blanket to cover his body behind the finish line. The reporters and cameramen pressed on his both sides. Everyone was surprised when the young man joined his hand to greet the people who ran close to him but he continued running. His back faded away until passing through the event zone to the outside community.

Soon, while he was moving through the buildings and houses in the city center, he looked up to the sky above. He found that the sky was clear with a few lines of clouds, like the sky of the village where he left.

"A runner's duty is to run." the deceased coach's words echoed in his head. Bikhila never forgot about it.

Surprisingly, the voice of resistance in his head paused. The young winner still ran...with a grin like the villagers usually did.

Thai Parliament “Phan Waen Fah” Awards 2020	วรรณกรรมรางวัลพานแว่นฟ้า ประจำปี ๒๕๖๓
Short Story	เรื่องสั้น
Winner Prize	รางวัลชนะเลิศ
What’s Waiting Behind the Finish Line	สิ่งที่รออยู่หลังเส้นชัย
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