

Mortal Champions

By Stefani Nellen (originally published in The Masters Review Anthology IX, ed. Rick Bass)

At a small track meet in college, many years ago, I had what might be called a near-death experience. Based on the few things I heard from those who saw it happen, I have to conclude that it probably looked pretty embarrassing from the outside.

Here is what I remember: I ran the mile, the slower of two heats. At the time, I read Bannister's autobiography, about how he would run in a park at night without keeping track of time, chasing and inhaling his own breath. I fantasized about the heat between his tracksuit and his skin.

Something turned: I wanted him (and judging from his autobiography his younger Self might have been too humble, awkward and polite to refuse me) – then I wanted it, the thing I saw in him – then I wanted to be it, and then I was doomed.

We lined up for the race. The guy next to me angled his torso forward. His last name was Connor. Right away, he took the lead and hammered away. A group rallied to give chase, and I was among them. At half way, Connor was still ahead and looked to stay there. We were satisfied keeping an eye on him, expecting him to crash and fall back. Our coach called out to me: “Relax, for God's sake.” I felt like shit, my intestines wanted to burst out of me, and my breath was wet and pleading, like a bad porn soundtrack. It was now Peter van Meer, George Howe and I giving chase, and Connor looked over his shoulder. His face was burning. Spit hung from his chin.

The official leaned forward to change the marker to 1 lap to go. He started to turn the leaf when Connor passed him and was done when we ran past; he was an old guy who took his task seriously. The wind blew up his white hair, and with the breeze came a foolish hope. I accelerated. My stomach turned into acid, and the audience cheered. Peter and George

immediately covered my move and overtook me, the crowd cheered again, and before I knew it I was chasing Peter and George, who were chasing Connor. I lost contact. I had one move left and pulled up even with George's right elbow, and they ditched me again, this time for good. The chase pack overtook me, a whole train of them, like the band of demi-gods in the opening sequence of Chariots of Fire. Someone in the stands distributed ice cream cones from a freezer bag. I wanted one. I was running last.

Connor went all out on the final straight, and everyone screamed in a frenzy. My legs became numb, and then I couldn't feel them at all. My ankle crunched, a crack from deep inside my ears. I fell forward, tried to catch myself with my arms, and found they had gone, replaced by appendages that flailed like a pet monkey's. My face hit the track. Blood and rubber exploded in my mouth as I rolled across the lanes. All movement ceased.

The others ran on, unaware of my fall, and even if they had known they'd have been unwilling to sacrifice the race so close to the finish. My world became a segment of track, my horizon the crumbling delimiter of the infield and the tips of grass behind it.

When it was over, someone turned me on my back. The coach leaned over me and flung words at me I didn't recognize. Like fish food in a bowl, the sounds drifted towards each other and struggled to cohere. He pincered my eyelids with thumb and forefinger and hitched them up and down. My vision blurred and cleared. He brought his ear close to my lips, pressed his hand on my chest. My eyes burned, unblinking. Hot spit ran from the corner of my mouth. I couldn't wipe it off, couldn't even flick my tongue. More liquid welled out; my body convulsed — a slow wave from torso to feet, nerve signals originating from not-me — and I squirmed out of the grip of paralysis to puke. My eyes closed, finally. Pain roared in and settled on the side of my face and in the roots of my front teeth.

Then, I plain felt like shit. This, I could deal with.

I sat up, tested my limbs and tried to act like someone who wakes up with a nasty hangover. I grimaced and groaned.

“You gave us a good scare,” our coach said.

“You're welcome.”

Connor kicked my foot and said, I'm glad you're okay, man, but he really meant, thanks for stealing my thunder, wimp.

Later, the team doctor referred to the incident as a “case of nerves.” The story was that I went out way too fast and dealt with my panic and skyrocketing oxygen debt by falling on my face. “It's more common with girls,” he said. Shortly after, I quit the team. No one pressed me for the reasons. I didn't feel I could live down the spectacle of my “nerves” or come out about the low-tier fan-fiction of my Bannister fantasies. I researched diseases that started with falls like mine, and found many: a library of horror stories all potentially my own.

I couldn't do without running, of course, and a few years later I started jogging again. My body remembered the “fit”, like pain from a broken bone that flares up in bad weather. I knew I wouldn't be done with this until I stepped on a track again for another race. When I was in my forties, it was time.

By then, I had taken over a snake's nest of a psychology department as an outside head. My job was to siphon the energy previously spent on inter-lab warfare into actual research. Every morning, I met my two running buddies, Rick and Fabrice, at a nearby trailhead, and we'd take off for a run in the park. I'd met them the morning Barry and I moved into our house on

Carnegie Place. But before I laid eyes on either of them, I met Rick's wife, Felina. She reprimanded our movers for blocking her driveway.

“Imagine,” she said. “My husband is out on a run, and he's hit by a car. I need to get to him as fast as I can, but my car is blocked. Because of this.” She pointed at the moving van. “Ryan Moving and Storage,” she read from the van's side. “That's what I'll tell myself for the rest of my life. I couldn't be with him when he needed me, because of Ryan Moving and Storage.”

She spoke calmly, her gaze boring into mine. She appeared so convinced of the danger looming above her husband that I felt it, too—as if, by leaving the van where it was, I'd be responsible for the inevitable car crash and everything that followed.

Just when I was about to offer my apologies, two runners rounded the corner, a tall man and a small one. Felina exhaled and closed her eyes. I was relieved, too. I felt a minor but profound shift inside me, as if my life had for a moment been on the brink of disaster and fallen back on the safe side.

One of the runners, the man I'd later know as Rick Ricci —Felina's husband—was clearly a former track runner. You could tell it by his stride, by his muscular legs that carried the afterthought of his barrel-chested torso, and by the way he planted his feet toes first. But his past on the track would have been obvious to me even if he'd been old and overweight and wearing a tweed suit. There's something about the mindless grace of offering hundreds of miles to the great Unknown that other runners recognize immediately.

Fabrice was one of us, too: small, with a beer belly and a mop of sweaty brown hair. Before shaking my hand, he wiped his on a checkered bandana that dangled from the waistband of his baseball shorts.

By now, Barry had joined us. “We moved to Fit Street, I see.”

“I’d call it Faded Glory Boulevard,” Rick said.

“Our fast runs used to be our slow runs,” Fabrice said.

“You can say that again,” I said.

“Tragic,” Barry said. “What a collection of has-beens.”

“Just saying it like it is,” Fabrice said.

“So you all used to run in college?” Barry asked.

“Yes,” we three runners said, and laughed.

“Why don’t we run together,” I added on a whim. “I could use the accountability.”

“Right on,” Rick said. “Bright and early. 6 AM tomorrow.”

The trail we took led right down into a gorge. When we emerged again, sweaty and hurting and damn proud of it, Felina sat in her car at the corner of Reynolds and Carnegie, waiting for us with her window rolled down. Rick waved at her across the lawn and she waved back and took off. She was the breadwinner, working a corporate job downtown. I was curious about the morning ritual and the reason for their division of labor—if there was a reason—but I didn’t want to pry. Running was our neutral territory. We needed a place where we could be almost anonymous: a three-men army uniformed in moisture-wicking fabrics and shock-absorbent shoes that gave us a smooth ride. I’d hear the truth soon enough.

“Ready?” Rick said, and as always Fabrice and I said, “no,” and we took off. We took the steepest route down in order to pick up gravity-assisted speed, but the level trail at the bottom never failed to kill the illusion. Fabrice was usually the first to lose form, but he never caved; he stuck to the pace better than I could, and this morning was no exception. When we reached the

clearing with the water fountain and the apple green doggy bowl—the farthest point of our run—it was I who asked for a break.

Rick glared at his watch, and then at me. He made a sweeping gesture at our surroundings: the trail behind us, the abandoned picnic table, the freeway in the distance. “This isn’t cutting it anymore.” He grabbed my upper arm and pulled at it, pulled me closer to him. He’d never touched me before. “Come on. You used to run track. Three, four miles through the park, at a snail’s pace? Don’t tell me it doesn’t pain you.”

Fabrice was done drinking at the water fountain and joined us. His shirt stuck to his wet chest.

“What we need,” Rick said, “is a proper race. A race on a track. A race we can train for.”

“I vote for something short,” Fabrice said.

“The mile,” Rick said.

“Sounds good.” Fabrice pulled his bandana from his waistband and wiped his face and shoulders. “What? Everyone can suck it up for one mile.”

Rick and Felina invited us over to their place for the first time. It was a muggy, dark day. We sat at a table in the backyard. Fabrice was already there when we arrived. He and Rick had known each other forever; they’d grown up in each other’s houses, but I hadn’t noticed their familiarity with each other before, and how it excluded me. On the trail, running made us equals.

We talked logistics about the race. “If it’s a track mile, it will be a small affair,” Felina said. “You’ll have space for, what, ten competitors? Fifteen?”

“That doesn’t have to be a problem,” said Barry. “You could have seeded races, go from slowest to fastest. I can help keep track of the qualifiers.”

“Sorry, but this sounds too complicated,” said Felina. “Why not make it one big event for everyone? Like a road 5K. People pay to enter, and the money goes to a neighborhood project. Say, Celine's dog shelter or something.”

“I don't know, guys,” Fabrice said. “I like the idea of running on a track. It has class.”

It occurred to me that Fabrice might beat me. Some people are born fast and don't feel pain the way others do.

“Why not both?” Barry said. “Start out with the mile, and then run the 5K. The 5K runners warm up by cheering you milers.”

“Do we even know how to do this?” I said. “We need timing mats, we need permits, and we need a measured course...”

“I know people who organize local races each year,” Rick said. “It won't be a problem.” I believed him. I'd looked him up online, of course, and seen that as recently as two years ago, he'd made the podium at some of these local races he'd mentioned: the Firecracker 5K, the Gutbuster.

“I talked to a few running clubs, too,” he said. “They're going to spread the word. I won't be just the three of us lining up.”

“They'd do anything for you,” Felina said.

“They'd do anything to promote the sport,” he said.

“Uh huh,” she said. “That's why they'll run some obscure track mile when you ask them to. Because they love the sport.”

An uncomfortable silence settled on us.

“Maybe we should tell them,” Felina said to Rick.

Fabrice raised his hand. “I vote in favor.”

“Rick?”

“All right.”

Felina crossed her legs and gathered herself. She leaned forward. “Two years ago, Rick was abducted.” She glanced at him. “If that is what happened. We're still not sure. It started out as this classic scenario. Husband goes out for a run and doesn't come back.”

“Honey.”

She turned in her chair to address him as well as us. I got the sense she wanted to see the effect each of her sentences had on him. She was treading carefully. “A week later, they found you walking along the interstate, completely out of it. You had a head wound. At first you weren't talking. After a month, you did. But your voice had changed. It never changed back.”

“It's wild,” he said lamely. “When you watch old movies of me or something, it's like listening to a different person.”

“Except you're not different,” she said. “You remember who you are. You remember now.”

He nodded obediently. “I do remember.”

“So that's where we're at,” Felina said, still talking more to Rick than to us.

“You're a survivor. Of course they'll want to celebrate you by running a mile. The question is do you want to go back there. Do you want this attention now.”

“I just want to go out there and kick ass.”

“So what do you think?” Barry said when we were back home on our porch.

“About Rick? I think he needs this.”

“Like a form of therapy?”

“Yes, but without the talking.” I massaged my leg.

“So he never mentioned any of this to you.”

“No. If we talk, we only talk about running.” My leg felt weird. Itchy and numb at the same time. “I think I feel it again. That tingle I sometimes have.”

“You mean like ants crawling up and down?”

“Yes. I almost fell again this morning.”

“It's a bumpy trail.”

“No. This was different.”

The houses in our street looked more similar to each other in the dark than they did at daylight. A few houses down, Rick wandered about in his living room, already in his running clothes, picking up things.

“He's training on his own,” I said. “I saw him a few times. He's getting fast.”

“I told you before, if you're really worried about what's happening to your legs, or your nerves, or whatever your current theory is—”

“I know I sound ridiculous—”

“No, my point is: go see a doctor, and have it checked out. Don't put on your running shoes and break your back stumbling over a tree root.”

“Roger Bannister used to run at night.”

Barry took hold of my shoulders. “Roger Bannister was a doctor.”

We kissed. The Ricci screen door creaked open and fell shut, and Rick's steps pattered down the street.

The Ricci's decided to go along with the plan of running two races: First a mile on the track, then a 5K fun run for all comers. The 5K Start and Finish would be at a parking lot next to

the track. The course was course already certified for the Race for the Cure. Miller's Bakery became our biggest sponsor, and the three of us started to refer to our race as The Jelly Doughnut Mile.

Fun stopped, however, as soon as we set foot on the track. Gone were the mornings of running through the park and pretending to be three middle-aged guys who wanted to stay in shape. We were in serious training now. We did quarters, 200's, 300's, quarters, 800's, quarters, 300's, and all out 200's. Rick timed us. We felt he should; he was our leader in this, the one with the stakes.

A locker room building stood on one side of the track, a picnic table at the other. I used these two markers to pace myself through the workouts. At times, my mind drifted and I was watching the three of us from above, clicking off speed and rest intervals like clockwork, each taking his turn in front.

“It's going to be a strong field,” Rick panted as we steamed off between sets. “The Duquesne Team is in.” They were a college team. Their best runner held the state steeplechase record. Rick had also invited a couple of strong masters runners with PR's faster than mine, and he and Fabrice would definitely dust me on race day. My only shot at not finishing last in the Jelly Doughnut Mile now rested with someone else screwing up. Maybe I would, again.

I rolled my toes inside my spikes and shook out my legs, feeling for the familiar numbness. Sometimes it was there, sometimes it wasn't. Usually it was, but I managed to block it out. The beep of Rick's watch announced the next interval. Fabrice sprinted to the front with ease.

Felina ran towards me in the park. It was late, almost dark.

I wasn't running, just walking, trying to clear my head two days out from race day. My leg symptoms were nearly constant now. I had to pay attention to how I planted my foot. What did it mean? I'd dialed my doctor's number a few times, and hung up before anyone took the call. I had to run the mile first. I had to run it without falling down. Most people wouldn't get it, but a few would, and they'd be enough.

Felina was with me now, out of breath. "Have you seen Rick?"

I had, on Tranquil Trail. I told her, and that I'd been surprised to see him up there. We were supposed to rest up.

She bristled. "He's been running for hours every day. He's killing himself."

"Did you try to talk to him?"

She waved away the possibility. "He can't come last at the race," she then said. "It would destroy him."

"I don't think he'll be last."

"Good." She rubbed her arms. "But can't you make sure?"

"You mean I should let him beat me?"

"Yes."

"As I said, I don't think it will be necessary to pretend. He's in excellent shape."

"So your answer is no. I could have guessed."

"I just don't think it would help."

"You don't know him the way I do."

I couldn't argue with that.

"I'll try Fabrice," she said.

Race Day. The track was swarming with people, mostly runners and spectators of the 5K that would start after the mile. People drove around searching for parking space, families spread out picnic blankets, and the air smelled of sunscreen and doughnuts and coffee. The timing guys sat huddled over computers next to the timing mat at the 5K Start that would also be its finish line. Music blasted from the speakers, an upbeat rock number I couldn't place.

Rick and I nodded at each other across the infield. My body felt light around me. The mesh of my racing flats tickled my feet. My doctor's appointment was next week. The music faded to the background, and an announcer came on. "All right. Everyone head on up to the track for the mile race, we're about to get started!"

Rick took off his grey shirt and handed it to Felina, who gathered it in front of her belly. He wore red shorts and singlet, and cobalt blue spikes.

"Oh shit," I said to Barry. "He's open for business."

The Duquesne team warmed up on the track, young and bare-chested and reptilian. At the center of the infield, a man in a Pikes Peak Marathon shirt ate a sandwich while rotating his pelvis. Barry was off to buy doughnuts for a late breakfast.

I walked up to Rick. "How are you?"

"I'm all right. You?" His guard was up and solid. He hated my pity, accepted it as inevitable, a nuisance.

"Never been better."

A group of kids crossed the track, chasing each other and blowing soap bubbles.

"No quite the Olympics," I said.

"A race is a race." He looked at me, testing whether we were on the same page. And we were.

“Mile runners to the start!”

We lined up: Rick, Pikes Peak, Fabrice, a tall guy named Steve and a short guy named Steve, a couple of others, and I. Of course, there was also the Duquesne team. They smelled of algae. Maybe they had a lucky deodorant. The music stopped. The line of people around the track was closing. An official lifted the starting gun.

“On your marks.”

My core temperature dropped as a hush fell over us. We took a step forward and froze.

“Set.”

I missed the gun and followed the others in a panic. The Duquesne boys moved in another dimension and glided away from us. I managed to latch on to Pikes Peak. After one lap, I found my rhythm and overtook him. Team Duquesne hadn't lapped me yet, and everyone around the track was cheering. I was running next to short Steve. He tried to shake me, but I went with him. Idiot, I told myself, don't start racing yet. But I did.

At the half mile, Rick was about 200 yards ahead of me. With a burst of insanity, I went after him. He started to turn his head; I knew he'd heard me. I worried him. I scared him. I had him.

Ahead of Rick, Fabrice and tall Steve were neck and neck. Rick and I were flotsam in their wake. This flare of insight—that we were competing for eighth vs. ninth place—burned away what little caution I had. I hit the accelerator.

The leaders went into the final bend. The cheers grew louder, tense, agonized.

Rick stuck with me. Good job, I thought, but not good enough, sucker. Short Steve caught a second wind and overtook us. He ran like a schoolboy who missed the bus. I hurt badly

and so, judging from his groans, did Rick. He pulled even with me again, I went wide to keep him from passing, and far ahead of us someone younger and better won the race.

The announcer started yelling, the spectators screamed, and amidst it all, Rick managed to turn to me the exact moment I turned to him. His eyes were mad, his teeth too white. After an eternity, the final straight rolled out before us. We sprinted. The finish line jerked away from us with each step. Rick was next to me, still. Die, I thought. Die already. We were two banged-up racecars sliding towards the finish, parts coming off and going up in flames. Cheers rose—for us this time. And as we dove for the finish, I had more than Rick. Just a little more inside these legs that quit on me once.

The final steps are a blur. We dive across the line, and at first it's a replay of my fall years ago: my body spins and crashes, I bounce and roll across the track, skin tears from my hands and knees. It's done; the eagle has landed. Lying on my back, I bring my hands to my face, and taste salt and metal. My heart presses blood into the stiffening pools of skinless flesh at my knees and palms, surge after surge of neutral pressure— until the alarm blares: we have pain, like hooks lifting my flesh in the places where the skin is missing.

Fabrice walks up to me, throws his rag on my face, and I wipe myself off as best as I can. Slowly, I get up.

Rick is still down, on his side, his back to me. Felina is squatting next to him, her lips moving. She swivels her head, gets up, and hurries off with a frown.

“Good run,” says Fabrice.

“You too.”

Attention wanes: the 5K Start is in ten minutes. Further off, Barry is leaning against the fence and shaking his head, a bag of doughnuts in his hand. I want to stagger towards him and embarrass him with a bloody kiss on the lawn.

But first: Rick. He's still on his side with his back to us, so Fabrice and I walk around him. His eyes are wide open, his arms stretched out in front of him. He is focusing on his fingers. I kick his foot with mine in a gesture that could have meant, "way to steal my thunder, wimp," and that really means, "I'm glad you're okay."

Is he okay? I offer my hand, brace myself for the pain his touch will bring, and after a moment he takes it and sits up. Felina approaches with a medic, and Rick gestures at me and says, check him out first, I'm fine.

Fabrice says, "I could murder a doughnut." I point at Barry. Fabrice limps towards him with sounds of gladness. As the medic disinfects my hands, cranking up the volume of my pain for a few hot seconds, Rick and I look at each other.

"Good job," he says. "Nice rust buster. Next time, it's mine. Hey, Fabrice!"

"That's the spirit," I say. The medic proceeds to my knees and shoots liquid fire into the gashes there. "That's the spirit!" I call out. Blood is oozing down my shins and my legs hurt like hell.