

*Three Miles A Day*

*By Stefani Nellen (originally published in Tampa Review)*

Lorrie searched her closet until she found her decade-old tennis outfit and the still pristine sneakers she'd bought after a New Year's resolution. She changed and jogged down to the park. The trail was damp and cool, lined by ferns and deep puddles. When she passed under the bridge, traffic rumbled far above her.

Starting that afternoon, she ran three miles a day.

After the second missed call, her mother asked, "Did you meet someone?"

"No. I started to run."

She could imagine the verdict: Typical. Of all possible sports, it's running. The Hermit's Delight.

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By September, Lorrie was running ten miles a day.

A leathery woman in a Boston Marathon t-shirt always gave her a look when they passed each other. Her face and forearms glistened like freshly oiled oak floors. Her graying hair fell down to her eyebrows in sweaty corkscrews. One day, she pushed a button on her timepiece and slowed down to a halt.

"I've been meaning to ask you," the woman said. "Are you on a battery?"

"Not that I'm aware."

The woman lifted her the hem of her loose shirt and fanned her flat stomach. A gel pouch stuck from her hip pocket. They jogged to the park entrance together.

"I didn't catch your name. I'm Lorrie."

“My name is Boston,” the woman said. “I changed it legally after I ran three oh one in my last Boston Marathon.”

“Nice to meet you.”

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Lorrie and Boston only saw the poodles when they were almost upon them: three animals, white like the snow, pink bonnets on their heads. They sat perfectly spaced and puffed clouds of breath, as if someone had put them down, paws lined up behind the pink leash connecting them.

“What the heck,” Boston said.

A woman’s voice shrilled in the distance: “Where are you, girls? I’ve got your favorite!”

A child whined: “You’re not allowed to run away! Come back!”

The poodles stood up and paced, dragging the leash through the snow.

“Sweeties,” the woman’s voice called, “come here!”

One of the poodles glanced at Lorrie with pleading eyes.

“For fuck’s sake,” the woman yelled. “Come here!”

The child sniffled. “You said the f-word!”

A woman strode around the bend with big swings of her arms, a young copy trailing, mother and daughter dressed in identical neon-red snowsuits and fur-rimmed moonboots. The dogs bristled and gathered at Lorrie’s and Boston’s feet.

“Hey!” The woman shouted at Lorrie. “What are you doing to my daughter’s dogs?” She charged, surprisingly quick in the snow.

Lorrie sprinted away, Boston with her, the poodles right behind. To Lorrie’s surprise, the woman and her daughter gave chase. Lorrie imitated Boston’s melodramatic track deity posture—chest out, hands slicing the air—and turned to look over her shoulder.

The woman had managed to grab the leash and, no longer running, reeled in the whining poodles, using her lower arm as a crank. Her daughter screamed.

“Good girls,” the woman said to the poodles. “Good girls.”

After the poodle incident, Lorrie and Boston warmed up drinking whiskey and tea at Lorrie’s place, the first time they’d spend time at either of their homes together. The furnace roared in the basement.

“There are some creepy people out on the trails,” Boston said, holding the glass with both hands. “With some of them, you have to wonder whether they’re even people.”

“I get you.”

“Cheers,” said Boston. “To good girls, wherever they are.”

“And poodles.”

In the weeks that followed, they kept an eye out for mothers and daughters with white poodles, to no avail. They never found them.

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Lorrie and Boston signed up for a trail marathon in West Virginia. Boston came up with a low-mileage plan to minimize their risk of injury. The idea was for Lorrie to get an idea of the marathon distance.

Lorrie won the female division in three hours and fifteen minutes and took home a golden plastic trophy of a runner with winged feet. Boston got in second, a minute or two behind.

“I knew what their trophies looks like,” Boston said, driving them home. Lorrie polished the runner with the piece of cloth she used to clean her reading glasses. “That’s why I decided to go for second.”

“Sore loser.”

“Sore yes. Loser? Never.”

A smile broke open Lorrie’s face. “Oh, you.”

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On Lorrie’s birthday, Boston took her out for dinner and a few beers. At midnight she held up a cardboard postcard from the Boston Athletics Association and told her friend they were registered for the Boston Marathon.

When they walked to their cars, she clasped Lorrie’s shoulder and pulled her close. “You’re a human metronome. I have to break three this time. It’s my last shot. Will you pace me?”

Lorrie’s heart contracted. Cogwheels turned backwards. So this was their friendship: a last hooray. She’d been chosen because she fit an autumnal pattern. A wallpaper called *Bucket List of the Spinster*.

“Are you sure you don’t want kids?” her mother once asked her. “What happens when you get old?”

“I’ll be glad I’m not dead.”

Lorrie’s mother wasn’t a mean woman. It was probably with the intent to encourage Lorrie to wrap the appropriate padding around her soul before it was too late when she replied, “Don’t be so sure.”

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As they trained for the Boston Marathon, Boston introduced Lorrie to a special kind of long-chained sugar. You could pour it into a glass of water and the water would still look like water, but it would have eight hundred calories.

Lorrie poured the eight hundred calorie powder into the water and stirred. It tasted like water at first. The longer it stayed in Lorrie's mouth, the thicker it became, like someone else's slime. She spat it into the sink.

Throughout her 20s and 30s, Lorrie's mother constantly referred to her biological clock. At some point the discussions had taken on the idle tone of speculation: If a clock is ticking and no one listens, is it still telling the time?

Since Boston had declared her goal to break three, Lorrie thought of clocks all the time. They measured and weighed and planned, recorded mile splits and training paces, and plotted speed against distance in quarter-mile segments. At the height of marathon training, they were so used to being in motion that it was easier to close out a hard workout by slowing down for an hour than it was to stop cold.

“Why are you so serious about breaking three,” Lorrie said when they were passing a hydrant. “You're not dying, are you?”

“I'll tell you something,” Boston said. “There's a few seconds between my PR and sub-three. Just a slice of time. And I have to have it. It's who I am right now. I want to *be* this goal, and when I fail, part of me will die.”

Lorrie imagined the slice of time, the ticks of 2:59:59 counted down somewhere inside Boston's brain stem, and nothing beyond. *Human metronome*, Boston called her. Maybe she had been talking about herself.

In front of Lorrie's house, Boston said: “Are we still on?”

“We're still on.”

***PATRIOTS DAY:***

***YOUR FREE BOSTON MARATHON COVERAGE FROM A CROWDFUNDED  
YOUTUBE CHANNEL, powered by fans for fans***

*Good morning, folks, and thank you for watching our coverage of this year's running of the Boston Marathon. There are no lanes in marathon running, but as we coast over the mass of people lining up in Hopkinton at the start of the Boston Marathon, we have no trouble picking out our heroes as if they were standing in the lineup for a track race.*

*Here is Lorrie, a small woman all in grey, currently busy layering on the sunscreen. It's going to be hot out there today, and you want to be prepared. Lorrie is here because of the emaciated woman next to her, who, like the marathon and the city containing the finish line, is called Boston. Boston is determined to break three hours at this, her tenth attempt at the distance, with the help of her friend who acts as her pacer. Boston's GPS watch is strapped to Lorrie's wrist.*

A tribe of runners has invaded the village of Hopkinton. Fit men and women in high performance gear engage in arcane rituals such as stretching their calves, rubbing Body Glide between their thighs and elsewhere, and lining up in front of bright plastic port-a-potties. Some hug their friends and bound in place with excitement. Others withdraw into almost complete stillness. Volunteers in red capes hand out drinks and bagels and blow breath on their cold hands. The air smells of dew, earth, and hot coffee.

As the minutes pass, the runners start streaming into the corrals before the start, where they are sorted by expected finishing speed. Once they're inside, they start running in place—rather, they are pre-running, moving as if their feet were shackled together, and then, when the start is really close, they rein in the twitching and prick up their ears for the starting shot, like a

flock of neon-colored antelopes perceiving a hostile presence. A gust of rain mists them, but within seconds the clouds part and sunshine breaks through and illuminates the runners, the trampled lawn of Athletes' Village, the trashcans, and the school buses that have brought the runners here before dawn. The few spectators clap and take pictures.

The gun goes off. Lorrie and Boston move forward with the crowd. Lorrie feels sick. Everyone else appears ready to do this. She is lost in a sea of game faces, and moving down the chute with a number on her chest makes her choke up.

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*Today is the big day, folks, it's set to be in the upper seventies and runners will have to give one hundred and ten percent to finish within their goal time. Running the marathon is primarily a test of character, of course, and Lorrie has the speed, she has the talent, but how hungry is she? She might think of herself as a fun runner, one of the pack. Will this be enough to support Boston's bid for glory? Be ready to go big or go home – and we can only speculate where that is. Lorrie is starting to sweat, and so she should. In the first miles of a marathon, Nerves are not your friend.*

Lorrie crosses the red starting mat and hears a beep. The mat has registered the flat timing chip inserted into the bottom strip of the race number on her chest. It has begun. The metronome is ticking. The biological clock is ticking. Her time will be recorded and ranked, saved and published. She doesn't want this. This is not why she started running.

Boston is already breathing in the hissing rhythm of her long runs, even though they are still jogging slowly. The narrow street winds downhill, creating a bottleneck.

Lorrie needs to pee. "I'm thinking this was a mistake."

Boston purses her lips. “Typical first mile fretting. Ignore and continue.”

When they pass through Natick, delight is far behind them. Lorrie has trouble breathing. The mile-markers are a constant reminder of their progress. She taps Boston's arm and asks how things are going. Boston picks up her breathing a notch, as if to signal that she's working hard and unwilling to talk.

“We're halfway soon,” Boston says a little later. She bares her teeth. “Prepare for the Wellesley girls. They can be distracting.”

And they are. The Wellesley girls scream. They do not scream for Lorrie or for Boston but for the world of running in general. Their screams move the race forward like water powering a grinding mill. It would have hurt Lorrie to scream that loud, but the girls are energized by the noise they unleash. Hair streams down their shoulders and reflects the sunlight. Some girls lift their friends, others carry cardboard signs: *Kiss Me!* And another: *I Kiss Women!* Not a plea for attention, but a favor, like the hands reaching out offering high fives. Lorrie can't hear anything except the screaming, and for a moment she thinks she stopped running. She slows down and touches her chest to make sure she is still here. The hollow screaming mouths hover.

I was like them once, Lorrie thinks. A young woman like them. And so was Boston.

The latter is hard to imagine. Boston looks leathery and wizened next her, all strings and muscles—but supple, too. The goal of breaking three, the seconds it takes for that to happen, is contained inside her, but she's more than her goal. She'll need to be more, if she wants to make it.

The hollow screaming mouths hover and move. And they tell Lorrie what to do. Boston's GPS watch keeps bumping into her carpal bones. In slow motion, Boston turns around, raises her arms and squeezes her own neck. Her armpits are coated in white deodorant residue and salt. She



and Lorrie are the only two people who do not move. The rest flows forward, not terribly fast, but steady, and the road is shaking.

Still standing in the roar of the Wellesley girls' noise, Lorrie turns off the GPS watch hanging on her wrist. Boston's watch. The display darkens, and for a moment Lorrie expects Boston to crumple and faint. Their connection to the satellite is cut.

Which leaves the timing chip inserted into the race number. One by one Lorrie squeezes open the safety pins attaching the number to her shirt, slides them from layers of paper and textile, and closes them again so they won't prick.

Boston observes it all.

Lorrie collects the pins in her hand and drops them in one of the pockets at the back of her running shorts. The number itself, she folds into a square.

"We can do this differently," Lorrie says. She's not sure whether Boston can hear her. Repeating what she thought she heard when she unfolded the screams of the Wellesley girls deep inside the folds of her brain, Lorrie says, "not for the record, just for us.

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*We're back with our marathon coverage, folks, and Boston is looking as if she doesn't know what to make of this, and frankly, neither can we. Lorrie is walking to the side of the road and handing the number to one of the Wellesley Girls.*

*And just like that, they're off again, Lorrie and Boston, moving together at a nice clip. Let's see how this race unfolds—as anyone who knows the marathon will tell you, the hard part is yet to come.*

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"Sorry," Lorrie says one mile later. "The pressure got to me."

She waits for Boston to withdraw emotionally, like others have in the past. Boston stays with her. The cadence of their steps is just a little faster than before. They're making up for lost time, creeping up to the average pace per mile required to stay under the three-hour barrier.

"Partly my fault," Boston says. "I'm a control freak. Apologies."

"You're not a freak."

"Now you really offended me."

Simultaneously, the women register the next mile marker they're passing, compare their time estimate to their current fitness. No one mentions the watch, let alone turning it back on.

"We still got this," Lorrie says.

"I think so, too."

They move easily, burning the miles they put in during training.

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*What is happening now? They're overtaking a group of three men in bright red shirts. And the men don't like that, and one of them picks it up, and is now latching on to Lorrie.*

*And, wait a moment. We're just being told that the bright red group started behind Lorrie and Boston, but overtook them during the Wellesley incident. Now they are being overtaken again. And they're happy to pick up the gloves and make it a battle. That's the kind of story the Boston marathon is known for, of course. So, let's stay tuned.*

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The man with the red shirt pointedly stares at Lorrie's numberless chest. "Are you her guide?" He points at Boston.

"Huh?" says Lorrie. She's trying to hang on to the rhythm of her running. As long as she's running, she'll be fine.

He leans over, still running, so his face is close to hers. He talks slowly, almost yells at her, as if she'd failed to understand him for hours and the fact that he was still talking to her proved his superhuman patience. "Are. You. Her. Guide?"

Veering away from him, doing all she can to keep moving, Lorrie shakes her head.

"Didn't think so," the man says. He turns around to the other red runners. "Guys, I told you. She's not a guide." The pointing and watching and turning makes him bump into Lorrie, who almost falls. Around them, other runners turn their heads, and then dive back into their own race.

The man in red taps Lorrie's arm, hard. It hurts. She stops running.

"I just wanted to tell you that I appreciate you banditing this race," he says.

Lorrie knows what a Boston bandit is: Someone who does not officially enter the Boston marathon and yet insists on running the course when the marathon is run—without a number. The argument is that the road belongs to everyone, that race entries are too expensive, the masses too big, and the circus around qualifying too juvenile. *Heck, you can always bandit the thing*, Boston said when she wasn't sure whether Lorrie would get an official number in time.

Bandits are heroes to some, blacked out by race day tunnel vision by most, and mortal sinners to a few, among them—clearly—the man in red.

Five standing adults, two women and three men, now form an obstacle on the course. The other runners adapt and swerve.

"Got anything to say?" the man says to Lorrie. "Cat got your tongue?"

"She's not a bandit," Boston says. She and Lorrie and the three men are still standing still.

"She's electing not to wear her race number on her shirt. It's a free country."

"Where's the number?"

“In Wellesley,” Lorrie says. “With the girls.”

It’s true, but the man is not having it. “People work their ass off to qualify for this race.”

Boston takes a step forward. “You think we didn’t?”

“Hey there,” another red man says. “Easy.”

The two groups are eyeing each other. Lorrie still feels the man’s tap on her arm, the poke of his fingers, and it makes her flesh creep. Then she’s just tired, and wants to quit. And then she notices the man’s neon red shirt and his angry eyes, and she remembers the poodles in the snow, and their bonnets, and the leash. Now she and Boston are the poodles, twitching to run. And the men are the women, screaming and cursing and looking to grab the leash and crank it. Oh, right.

She exchanges a look with Boston. Boston gets it, too.

“Chase us,” Boston says.

“What?” says the man.

“You’re pretty fast. So are we. If you shake us, we quit. But none of that touching.”

The man smiles. His heartbeat is visible at the side of his throat. “You’re serious.”

On the road to Boston, a duo and the trio size each other up. The desire to move builds, until one of them makes a break. It’s Lorrie. Boston is next to her in a split second, the red group in pursuit. The metronome is gone, the numbers are gone, and so are the mile markers.

“You’re insane,” Boston says. “Let’s try and lose them in hills.”

Talking is hard now; they are running fast. To Lorrie, *Heartbreak Hill* is only a spike in the elevation chart. Boston has been there.

“This is fun,” Boston presses out.

“Isn’t it?” Lorrie says.

“Screw time,” says Boston. “As long as those guys don’t catch us.”

And they’re hooting with delight.

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*Always fun to see some showboating on the course. An exciting duel is unfolding: Men chasing women, the red shirts going after the understated grey. Beautiful. Lorrie and Boston run fluid and controlled, but the leader of the chase pack motors forward, punishing the asphalt under his soles and the cartilage in his knees. He bares his teeth in a grimace of pain or joy or the mixture of both, a common sight on the Newton Hills section of the Boston Marathon.*

*We'll leave them here, a long way before the finish line on Boylston Street, as our broadcasting funds are depleted, but keep in mind, folks, what they say about the finish: when you cross it, the next starting line is already in sight. If you're lucky they hand out water and bananas.*