

The Moment

(1) Joe Kinski's teammates and coach dismissed his fall as "a case of nerves." Joe knew better.

(2) In the weeks leading up to the race, Joe had been training like an animal. Which animal is anyone's guess. He would get up at four in the morning to run, and go out for another run at midnight.

(3) In his mind: Roger Bannister crossing the finish line at Oxford in 1954, in a uniform white enough to burn away the drabness of the day. The first time the mile was run in under four minutes.

(4) His reality: Dashing into downtown at night on the cracking, still-warm concrete plates of the sidewalk, bathing in the headlights of oncoming cars, the smell of air vents and thunderstorms. Joe Kinski, a solid but mortal distance runner.

(5) A former track star had moved into town to train close to campus. *The miler*, Joe called him in his mind, never his real name.

(6) The miler broke his ankle in a cross-country race in Mombasa once, and had to be carried off the course. The medics froze and huddled as the chase pack bounded around them, the miler between them on the ground, his legs caked in red earth, his face grey. Now he was working on a comeback.

(7) The miler was flat and reptilian. His feet touched the ground quickly, like lightly punching a sandbag. He could run as fast as Bannister; he had already done so.

(8) When he tells the story, Joe wants his listeners to feel at ease with him. He says: I had friends and a life. I partied until late and ate take-out. But no matter what, I went out there at midnight. The miler was out there, too. We raced each other in the dark, and we never exchanged a word.

(9) It sharpened my life, so I could cut into the future, cut out who I was.

(10) At the first outdoor meet of the season, I lined up for the B-race. The miler was a late entry in the A-race and still warming up. In daylight he was small. He crossed his arms behind his back and pushed out his chest, his eyes on me. He smiled.

(11) I went for it. Sub-four pace, fast enough to destroy the small chance I had of sneaking a win. I did it to stop him from smiling.

(12) I summoned a magic I did not have.

(13) I lost control over my body with a lap to go, fell hard, and rolled across the track. My head crashed against the ground. I lay still. The taste of blood, the smell of grass and rubber. I couldn't move. A warm stream of saliva came out of my mouth and ran down the side of my face.

(14) “Speak to me. Is anyone home?” The miler was kneeling next to me. I still couldn’t move, and thought he would watch me die. He stared into my eyes, willing me to breathe. I had to throw up, and my body turned away from him, finally unlocked. When I was able to sit up, he was gone.

(15) After that, I stopped running.

(16) But I sat next to the window at night wanting to spawn a second me that could melt through the glass, solidify outside and continue the race.

(17) The paralysis I had felt on the track after my fall was still there. It was a dark blue liquid stuck in all my bones, and it would spread if I upset it by moving too much.

(18) As a middle-aged man, I could run a turkey trot. What I could not do was run with abandon until I burned up and died. I still had a solid life, no big deal. And I drank carton milk, good for the bones.

(19) I chose a career in developmental and cognitive psychology, between the hard edge of behavioral science and the soft edge of computer science. A compromise, like jogging.

(20) Then I met Barry.

(21) It was at a conference on Intelligent Systems in Edinburgh. He was brilliant; I was meat in the room. The lectures involved code like weaving patterns and box-and-arrow diagrams where

all the arrows pointed inwards. He and I were talking a lot at first, and then we tried different types of silence.

(22) When the conference was over, we were all trying to catch a cab or a bus to the airport at the same time. Barry was walking ahead of me without knowing I was behind him. He pulled a suitcase with one hand and carried a yellow jacket over his arm.

(23) I wanted to kiss him in view of the world. Not a social peck on the cheek but his lips on mine, the yellow jacket on the ground, the people around us inconvenienced because they had to walk around us, like the runners who had to run around the miler in Mombasa.

(24) Barry was thirty-five. I was forty. He said he looked forward to being fifty, or to whichever age that would give him the feeling of being complete.

(25) His mother was American. She killed herself and in his memory it erased almost everything else she did. His father was from Curaçao. He had a genetic defect that destroyed his memory. When Barry was twelve, his father said, “Who is this? Is he laughing at me?”

(26) Barry lived off a series of research grants that rewarded the quality of his mind. He had degrees in linguistics and computer science, and in dating situations he referred to himself as “a generally curious person.”

(27) He looked like an urban professional, but he did not identify with this label. He said once: “I’m too cerebral. I feel semi-transparent and vaguely repulsive, like a seahorse or an embryo.” And I said, “An embryo is a good place to start.”

(28) I promised him that, unlike his father, I would always recognize him. He would never get a late night phone call about me, the way he had about his mother.

(29) My academic career, a summary: No intellectual fire, but not bad enough to let go.

(30) We had a long distance relationship, with waypoints that changed with every new job Barry took. He travelled after the most interesting research, I stayed put with mine. I took pride in the overnight flights, my burning eyes, my glasses sliding down my nose, the smell of lemon air freshener in my clothes.

(31) We pretended to have less time than we did. We took a room at an airport hotel, did it, left, told each other on the phone or in writing what else we would have liked to do, if only we’d had more time. And we meant it.

(32) He asked me whether the miler and I had ever done it. “Yes. Every night. We were running in the dark.”

(33) Always embarrassing: sharing your obsessions with a real life lover. My obsession with Bannister comes from the moment and the thing he is doing, not from the objective truth of his

real body. Take a closer look at the famous picture of him breaking the four-minute mile: his fingers are long and spidery, his hair too thin, and his grimace too dramatic. And yet.

(34) Barry collaborated with a researcher who published sexy articles about tool-making crows. The researcher lived in controlled wilderness with the crows. Once a month, she travelled to the nearest outpost and sent Barry a movie he could compare to the movie he had made of his simulated crows. Usually, the real ones were smarter.

(35) I became passionate about fitting different models to the behavior of children who are in the process of learning how to tell a lie.

(36) We moved in together.

(37) I still dreamed of my fall. In my dream, I stay on the ground, and end up in a hospital, connected to machines. Tubes as hard as branches go up my nose and down my throat and keep my breath going. My heart is beating. It's out of my control. In my dream, I never sleep.

(38) Our new neighbor, Felicia Ricci, was upset because our moving van was blocking her driveway. "I know it's a small driveway, but it's mine. I don't like it blocked. What if I have an emergency? Or my husband does? That's two possible emergencies right there, both made worse by your van."

(39) Her husband, Rick Ricci, came around the corner, jogging at the easy pace of those who want the world to know they can go much faster. He was solid and sweaty, his teeth white and long. He wore cobalt blue running shoes, the same kind the miler had worn years ago.

(40) If shoes could talk, these would have said: "Hello."

(41) Rick said: "I always get my miles in early, down in the park. Does that sound like fun?"

(42) I said yes.

(43) Felicia left for work early and came home late. I never saw Rick outside of our morning runs.

(44) We kept our pace slow and conversational. We mostly talked about how much we enjoyed taking it easy. We controlled our breath, added bounce to our steps, and took care to keep our true effort a secret.

(45) A scar ran across his forehead and disappeared behind his ear. A line so thin it could have been cut with paper, but in the right light it looked like a crack, as if his skull had been glued together once. As if you could shift the halves when you touched it.

(46) A few weeks into this, I saw him run alone late at night and far ahead of me, on a trail we never ran together. He was fast, and his shirt was white, and dirty, as if he had fallen badly and got back up.

(47) I tried to catch him. I couldn't. At home, my right leg was numb. Then it felt as if a swarm of ants crawled up from my heels to the underside of my ribcage. I sat down on the bed and kneaded my calves. The leg looked fine from the outside.

(48) I spied on Rick. He always did his solo runs late in the evening. Mondays on the trails, and Fridays on the track.

(49) Soon, I could estimate the remaining time of his workout by the sweat pattern on his shirt.

(50) Barry scratched his left palm with the fingers of his right hand. "How far is this going to go?"

(51) I said: "I need to stop these dreams."

(52) The pace of our morning runs became faster. Rick must have been on to me.

(53) It was night-time logic: Out-run the blue shoes, catch the one who wears them, and become him. In retrospect, it might have been a symptom, a psychotic episode. Selective obsession with a meaningless detail. Maybe it was simple desire. Whatever its cause, I was out there at night, running.

(54) The night uptown was warm like the air behind a fridge. Music from cars shook the membranes of my cells. I was running past a mural of pigeons eating people. Ahead of me was Rick, all in white.

(55) In the old newsreels you only hear the starting shot, a cheerful tune, and the voice of the announcer. You don't hear Bannister's steps on the cinder or his groans when he collapses into the arms of the crowd. He is distorted and beautiful at the end, as if what he is doing is too much for the human shape. The miler was the same, and Rick was the same. The crevice between his shoulder blades covered in sweat. I almost caught him.

(56) It felt as if the tiles gave under my feet and I crashed on the pavement. Much later, when I was cold, an empty bus lurched past with the sound of a broken wave being sucked back into the ocean.

(57) Later, I was limping through the aisles of a pharmacy. I grabbed a can of coke from the fridge and tore it open. When I lifted the can I saw my melted reflection on the top.

(58) Someone at the pharmacy called Barry, whose number was on a wristband he had made me wear.

(59) On the way home in the car, Barry said: "It's not even that you scare the shit out of me right now, even though you do. It's worse."

(60) He was in love with the crow researcher.

(61) "She makes me feel as if I'm the only human she can talk to."

(62) Now for the final act: He paces across the living room, and pushes his shirtsleeves up to his elbows. "You were this person for me. You were my human. Because of how weird you are."

(63) “I’m not weird.”

(64) “Yes you are. Or what are you calling this?”

(65) Then, even more upset, but quiet, he said: “They called me in the middle of the night. They woke me up to get you because you were stealing soda at a pharmacy at the other side of town, and you were dripping blood. I got calls like this about my mother. Not just the final one, but others like it. Too many. You promised I would never get a call about you.”

(66) “Your eyes, when I came to get you...” he said.

(67) We were renting. He could leave easily. In a moment of bitterness, I said, “I’m not your fucking parent.” He threw what looked like a piece of bone into his suitcase. “Guess what, I don’t want to be yours, either.” Not our best moment.

(68) They say that when one door closes another one opens but that didn’t really happen.

(69) A few days later, when I came home from work, Felicia lingered in front of her house and ran over to me as soon as I got out of the car. “I haven’t seen Rick for days.” She sobbed. “Maybe he’s dead this time.” I did what anyone would have done. I asked: “What do you mean, this time?”

(70) “He got lucky once,” she said. “Hit by a drunk driver while he was out on a run. He should have died, but he didn’t.”

(71) He fractured his legs, his ribs, and his skull. His teeth and memory were gone. He only remembered how to run. At first she didn't let him.

(72) He sat at home with his white new teeth, his hands in his lap. All he did was breathe, and use the bathroom. She decided to let him run after all. "It was the only thing he had left."

(73) I might as well stop there.

(74) About a year later. Joe Kinski is living in the same city but in a different place. His late-life gift is his neighbor Claudia. She's a long-distance runner, around sixty years old, with weather-polished apple cheeks and a body like a whip.

(75) The symptoms, as he calls them, have become more frequent, like children who are tired of hiding and spring a surprise, saying, we've been here all along, and it's time for dinner. He writes them down so he can track their increasing frequency by looking at the number of lines on the pages. Loss of balance, wobbly legs, hands losing their grip, burning crawling angry stupid insects inside his limbs, and problems finding the right words for stuff.

(76) Weeks of nothing, followed by weeks of nothing but that.

(77) To the neurologist, he wants to talk about all the airports with Barry, about the blue shoes, about the pharmacy, and about Roger Bannister.

(78) The neurologist starts typing on his computer. It's the first dominoes falling. At the end, there is the answer.

(79) Joe takes the bus home. He sits on the bench in the back, in the middle, with nothing to lean against. A plastic bottle rolls between the seats when the bus makes a turn. Most of the time, his mind is a blank, and he keeps counting the other passengers, all five of them, all of whom have been in here before him and stay in after he gets out.

(80) He waits for Claudia on the porch. She finally comes home from her run, a welt on her cheek where a twig has slapped her. Her breath is a cloud in the cold. "Do you want to sit with me for a bit?" she says. "Let me get dressed first, or my legs will freeze off, and we don't want that."

(81) The cold is good for him. In the winter, he still goes for a run now and then, and comes home exhausted and satisfied. With stiff, gloved fingers, he opens his jacket. His warmth escapes into the room, his skin is clammy.

(82) Shortly before Christmas, he stumbles and slips on a patch of black ice and breaks his leg.

(83) The cast will come off long before summer. "This is good," Claudia says. "Sweat inside a cast is the worst."

(84) In the hospital, he wakes up in the middle of the night and finds the miler next to his bed. The miler is wearing a dark red tracksuit with white stripes on the sides. His body is as flat and

reptilian as ever, but crippled from being as great as he is at this useless thing called running. He is in constant pain now, and it makes him attractive; you wonder what you could do to make him forget. He is eating noodles out of a box with a pair of uneven chopsticks.

(85) When he notices Joe is awake, the miler picks up the remote control of his bed, and the mattress buzzes and shapes itself against Joe's back. Joe has never seen the miler's face so clearly. He has full lips, widely set eyes under black, asymmetrical eyebrows, and an unfortunate small chin.

(86) Joe says: "We're both fucked. Is it different for you, or do we feel the same?"

(87) The miler says: "It helps having had a moment." He means his victories, all the moments when he beat all-comers and came out on top.

(88) He leans in, but before anything can happen, Joe falls asleep again. The next morning, the other bed in the room is empty.

(89) The summer is bad. Joe has difficulty talking. His tongue is acting like a hung-over teen, and most of the time Joe decides that whatever he was going to say is not worth the effort. Claudia takes his hand. "With the new meds, you'll get better. We will talk again."

(90) She's right. He even goes back to work. He walks with a cane and uses the university shuttle service. He teaches sitting down, and it tires him so much he needs a nap after each class, but he's working.

(91) He tells Claudia about Rick Ricci, who did come back after an unexplained absence of one week. What did he want from me? Joe wonders. Who was he? “Maybe he was a ghost when you met him,” Claudia says. “Maybe he was a zombie.” On her porch, no idea is taboo.

(92) Joe and Barry meet again when Barry is attending a conference hosted by Joe’s university. Joe is in a good spell, as he often is in the winter. Barry descends the stairs to the computer science lobby with ease, the faint wrinkles around his eyes a welcome addition. He can’t speak because of a severe throat infection that still needs to heal. He communicates by typing on a device designed by the company that currently hires him. They have arranged to meet for a coffee at the cart in the lobby, and now they are both nervous. Joe says, “You look good.” Barry writes: *You do, too.* He adds: *I mean it. Nice cane.* Joe has to laugh. People standing in line at the cart turn around. Two men, one device, half a dialogue: your entertainment while you wait.

(93) When they have their coffee, Barry types: *Are you still into Drywall, I mean Bannister?* “We’re still good friends, but we don’t see a lot of each other these days,” Joe says. He doesn’t ask about the tool-making crows or the scientist. They finish their coffee and have early dinner. All evening, the old thing is still there: the desire to leave, undress, make love. In Joe’s bedroom, when they are already naked, Barry hesitates. With effort, he whispers: “I’m not sure what to do. I don’t want to hurt you. Is this okay?” Joe by now is the master of his disease. He takes Barry’s hands and says, how about this, this is good. And this. That’s right. Later, Barry whispers, pausing after each second syllable to let his throat recover: “I was so afraid of this. But I want to stay.” Joe says, “I want you to stay, too, but I don’t want you to see the end.”

(94) All right then, so here's what happened—how the rest of the story goes. I knew my prognosis would cross out many things, and that it would be ugly. Barry said he didn't care, that he didn't want to run away. How could I make him leave—for his own good?

(95) I tried to put up a brave front. "We all have to die, right?" It was very much not working. He let me get it out of my system without comment.

(96) Then he rolled onto his back and made a hollow in front of his eyes with his hands, and pretended to watch a movie in there. He imitated, in a whisper, the voice of the Bannister newsreel announcer: "And it is Joe Kinski who bursts away from the lead pack and charges for the finish line. He is truly," he paused, then lied through his teeth, "striding magnificently."

(97) What would have happened if I'd had a shot at my moment? For instance, by racing Rick Ricci?

(98) Take off your TRACK shirt and be naked. Toe the starting line. Many people come to watch. Everyone wears black.

(99) In the fog up the hill, people are spreading their picnic blankets.

(100) Lines are forming in front of the restrooms.

(101) "On your marks."

(102) We take a step forward and freeze. As if the precise angles of our elbows and knees decided over loss and victory.

(103) The morning after our reunion, Barry had to leave early to attend the first conference session. He left me a letter. In the letter, he wrote: *I wanted to become a scientist after I discovered my parents lied to me about dying.*

(104) *At first they told me that people don't really die, and that I shouldn't worry. When my grandfather "passed away," the story became more complicated: People and animals fall into a kind of coma when they are old, but after that, they get better. But they have to live somewhere else, where the air is fresh and where they can have special food. A "funeral" was a kind of somber send-off party. (Still true!) I remained suspicious, but my parents could be very convincing.*

(105) *This [an arrow pointed to what was lying on the desk next to the letter] is a piece of bone. It's from the shell of Pete, my pet turtle.*

(106) *He died in hibernation. I was maybe six or seven. I still remember digging in the spring, how cold the earth was. I used my fingers because I didn't want to split his shell with a shovel. When my fingertips hit something hard, I knew what it was. Pete's head was hanging out of the shell like a marble in a leather sack.*

(107) *I took Pete inside. My parents were still asleep. I woke them up, lifted Pete, and said I knew the truth now. I buried him again, and when there was nothing left but the shell and some*

bones, I smashed the shell with a shovel. I wanted a piece to remind me that I could observe things and find out the truth. That's how I became a scientist.

(108) Observe things and find out the truth. If he wants to observe me, I can give him that. I myself will observe for as long as I can.

(109) Observation a: One lap into the mile race, I'm thirsty. This race, like all of them, will be a matter of liquids.

(110) Rick Ricci turns to me, a gash in his head, most of his teeth missing, his eyes dead. "How are you feeling?"

(111) "I probably won't win," I say. And then I speed up.