

# Rabbit

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a short story by  
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The sound was cathartic, defining a womblike serenity she felt after only a couple of easy miles.

The rain, merely noted as color, was cooler than it should have been in August, in Louisiana, and it made her want for a jacket. It would likely stop by the time she was done, if she felt chill she could always take a cab back to the dorm. She would run only an easy 10k this Saturday because it was the last Saturday of the month, supposed to be her second 'off-day' from her regimen.

Slap, slap, her shoes tapped the pavement. She'd opted for road miles because the image of the track served only as a catastrophic reminder of her coming failure, of two wasted years at the collegiate level and a lifetime of wasted dreams, gone not in moments but mere seconds, three to be precise, an eternity for a sprinter, a leaden blade diabolically twisted into the back of a 800 meter runner like herself.

"Now, I am not going to sit here and tell you to just go out and be yourself and do your best because we both know that as of today your best is not quite good enough."

Her Grandma Lorsi had carefully reminded her just two days before as Stacy Billings sat beside the hospital bed and bit down around a fingernail.

Stacy stopped gnawing at her nail and stood to change the channel on the TV. "Maybe when they let you out of here I can wheel you down to the track and see if you notice anything."

"They'll let me go home when and if my white count is up, Stacy. Even if that is tomorrow, the trials are tomorrow. And how is your best time?"

Stacy shrugged. "Not good enough, you know that. I mean, if I could manage my mid-pace right, I just know I could outkick any of the girls down the stretch."

Grandma Lorsi said: "If, but when have you done this before? Ever in a big race?" With considerable effort Grandma Lorsi moved herself higher in the bed.

Stacy looked down. "I get so amped out there; I can't think straight. I know I can finish but it doesn't matter if I'm already twenty meters back before we hit the last 100. Coach Stone has me try to visualize the second four hundred as the first when I'm still fresh, but it's hard for me to think when I'm running fast about anything other than my breathing and my next step.

Sometimes, Grandma, I think I would run myself to death if no one stopped me. It's such a waste, all these years I've been running and dieting and training my butt off, watching what I ate, what I drank, my sleep."

"I know, I know"

"And for what, now? To go out tomorrow and get my brains beaten in by Kathy and Beth? Probably Ashley too. And fourth is a joke, second is a joke. It's always a joke, especially tomorrow."

"I don't disagree, Stacy. I know how hard you've trained. Remember, I was almost an Olympian, once." Grandma Lorsi coughed a deep hack that shook her frail body.

## Two

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Stacy stood outside of the track, late in the afternoon. She paced and called Grandma Lorsi on a payphone.

*"Yeah Grandma, I'm okay, I'm okay, really. We knew what was going to happen and it did, okay? So no big deal, life goes on, all of that crap. I called to tell you to put on Channel Fourteen at three-thirty. Yes, they're broadcasting the last day of trials and I'm running rabbit in the 1,500, the mile, for Aldawie Rutunda. She's going to try to set another record or something. I'll be on TV so I thought you might like to know.*

*"You know what else Grandma, I'm going to do what you said, now that I don't care anymore, now that it's all over I'm going to run two-ob-one for my 800 split. That's what I needed to qualify this morning. It's a little faster than they want but screw it, right? It's not like they're paying me and anyway it'll be fun knowing that you're watching from the hospital, like our little secret, no one else will know. I'll turn two-ob-one, I swear, and you can watch on TV and cheer for me."*

## Three

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"Slower, slower," Rutunda admonished Stacy as she led the pack through the first quarter split.

“Split one-oh-three, split one-oh-three,” Rutunda hissed.

Coach Stone was yelling too, but Stacy was floating and paid no attention to either of them. She thought: *I'm running two-oh-one, honey and damned if I don't. Sorry about your records. Here we go, Grandma. Hold on to your hat.*

## Four

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Grandma Lorsi motioned for the nurse to turn up the volume. “That’s my granddaughter running.”

“Oh yeah?” The nurse walked over and turned up the set. “The one that was here the other day?”

“That’s her.”

“She’s a distance runner? I didn’t know. I thought she was too short for that. Those other girls are tall.”

“Funny, that’s what she’s been told. Just a little louder please”

(TV)

*One-oh-one is a very fast split, a little too fast don't you think, John?*

I think it is if Rutunda is going to set a new world record. She likes to go out in a little over a minute, one-oh-two or one-oh-three so she can save some for that legendary kick. What do we know about the ‘rabbit’?

*That's Stacy Billings, John, a junior from LSU, local girl she's used to this kind of heat. She's an 800 meter specialist, finished third behind Kathy Whitmore who set a US record here on Tuesday. She's more of a sprinter but at five foot one she's just not really built for the four hundred, too short for the longer distances. From what I can gather, she's got a good kick but really nothing else, nothing in the middle.*

Which was why she finished fourth.

*Yes, probably why she finished fourth.*

Well she’s making those women keep a torrid pace, probably not too much for Rutunda or maybe Diane Battu but I doubt very much if we’ll be seeing the pack stay with them after they hit the 800 split.

*Maybe sooner if she doesn't slow down.*

That's right, Laura, maybe sooner. We knew this race was going to come down to Rutunda and Battu and really the only way we're going to see any kind of record set on a day like this is if they come into the third split red-hot and Battu can push the speed up until that final six hundred meters where Rutunda's legendary kick comes in. Battu will have to run the race of her life just to keep within striking distance and, frankly, I just don't see her being anywhere near Rutunda at the finish line. Rutunda has the six fastest times this year and eight of the ten fastest times ever in the women's 1,500.

*Generally referred to as the women's mile for some of our viewers.*

Yes, generally still referred to as 'the mile'.

Grandma Lorsi furrowed her brow. She pulled the tubes from her forearm with her right hand, and then leaned imperceptibly closer toward the set.

(TV)

*John, can you tell us what exactly is going on here? I know this is only a sanctioning race, but have you ever seen anything like this before?*

No, Laura, I haven't. Maybe she forgot the lap count, but you would think besides Coach Stone screaming at her from the infield if nothing else her body would be telling her she's running a lap too far. Really, it's amazing that she's been able to keep up this pace. I mean, looking down at the track it looks like a three-woman race.

*Yes, if you didn't know that one of the women was the 'rabbit'.*

Yes, that one was the 'rabbit'. And again, for those of you at home who may not be familiar with the term, a 'rabbit' is a runner who is not really in the race, they're there to set a fast pace for the stronger runners and then normally, well always, they're supposed to drop out at the half-split. But this little gal, this Stacy Billings has apparently forgotten how many laps she's run and has just kept running. She kept on going, Laura, and now they're approaching a thousand and the three of them have separated from the pack by a good twenty meters. Now bear in mind, these are the top 1,500 meter runners in the country. I'm curious I guess, has Billings ever run a mile competitively before?

*I don't think so, John, we're trying to find out more about her, there's only so much that we know.*

Well I know this, Laura, if they keep this pace up for another lap I really think we might see something amazing here because so far they are absolutely scorching the track and neither Rutunda or Battu... or Stacy Billings are showing any signs of slowing down. Now the 1,000 split for Rutunda when she set the world record in Indianapolis last month was two-thirty-nine and

they just raced past that in two-thirty-seven-two so we really might be seeing something exciting here.

*Apparently John we're not the only ones who think so. Just looking down there at the infield the other athletes have pretty much ground to a halt and moved along the rail. The noise is growing and all eyes are now glued to the track and the developing drama as a woman named Stacy Billings, a junior at LSU, an 800 meter specialist who is only in this race as the 'rabbit' has not only set what would certainly be a world-record pace if the leaders can maintain it, but she has also apparently forgotten how many laps to run and is now nearly an extra lap into this 1,500 meter time trial.*

Grandma Lorsi was close to getting up from the bed, so drawn to the television as the almost violent clanging of the bell for the final lap was nearly drowned by the cacophonous crowd noise. It was like the sound you hear at a horse track for a big race when a lot of money is at stake and the race is extremely close.

(TV)

(Shouting excitedly) Well here we go, Laura, the bell lap. The bell has rung! This is one of the most amazing things I've witnessed in my thirty years around the track.

*It really is amazing, John. What do you look for now? What's going to happen?*

Wow, I don't know anymore, Laura, but I would still look for Battu to fade a little around turn one and the moment Rutunda senses it, she's going to start her kick, then watch out. We will definitely see world-record time, definitely see some history being made here if Rutunda stays to form.

*John, what about Stacy Billings? It's pretty clear now that she knows exactly what she's doing and thinks she can win this race.*

There's just no way, Laura. Absolutely no way. I mean, I'm standing just like you are and I can't believe what we're seeing, but we're talking about a woman who didn't even qualify in her own distance, the 800, which is basically half of this 1,500. And she has, to the best of our knowledge, never even competed in a sanctioned race of a mile or more, but, you're right, she is right on the heels of the women's world-record holder, Aldawie Rutunda, and Rutunda's only consistent challenger, Diane Battu...and I guess somebody should have told Billings she can't do what she's doing because *THERE GOES RUTUNDA* into turn two and it's not Battu who is at her heels but Stacy Billings, who is absolutely flying, running like she has nothing to lose. If Rutunda can hold onto her kick, then, ladies and gentlemen, we are about to see a new world-record here today.

*John, Billings is right with her.*

The nurse came into the room and approached Grandma Lorsi to see why Grandma Lorsi was up from bed. The nurse was about to scold her before she followed Grandma Lorsi's gaze to the maniacal announcer who was desperately trying to be heard above the crowd's noise blaring from the TV.

"That's her? That's your Granddaughter there up near the front? She's good. She's good. I didn't know she was that good."

Grandma Lorsi opened her mouth, lips aquiver, but no words came.

We didn't either, she thought. *Go get 'em, girl.*

(TV)

(Shouting excitedly) She's right there! It's a two-girl race right now and they are running very, very fast. My goodness, Laura, this is incredible, I...I don't think, I can't put into words what we're seeing here today as they hit the final turn. Rutunda is beginning to lose a little of her form and her composure as this complete unknown, this little lady from LSU, who has no business even being in this race pushes her like she hasn't been pushed before. Rutunda has looked back twice now as they come to the home stretch, and you can see the pain etched in her face. She simply can't run any harder, and wait...she can't hold her, *OH MY GOD...* my god, here comes Stacy Billings running hard on the outside in her own lane, her own world. The little dynamo, she is outkicking Rutunda. *SHE IS GOING TO OUTKICK RUTUNDA!* Oh my god! *OH MY GOD!* She's pulling away now, running straight up and down, her arms pistoning. Her form is incredible! Perfect. She's going to shatter the world record! She is going to destroy the world record! I can't believe what we're seeing! I just can't believe it. Rutunda has come undone, and it's Stacy Billings...she's still accelerating at seventy meters, at fifty meters. The crowd is absolutely insane, the infield is screaming! Twenty meters, ten meters... she hit the tape! She just hit the tape at three-forty-six-nine! Unofficial, Rutunda in three-forty-nine-nine, both runners shattering the old mark, and Rutunda has just collapsed on the track. My god, this is incredible, we have just witnessed history, ladies and gentlemen! I just don't know what to say."

Smiling, with the faintness of moisture pressing on her eyes, the nurse helped Grandma Lorsi shuffle back to the bed. As she laid back down she was smiling, and she closed her eyes for the last time.

Associated Press

New Orleans, LA

At the US Olympic Time Trials in New Orleans, LA, Stacy Billings, a junior 800-meter specialist from LSU shattered the world-record in the women's 1,500 meters by nearly four seconds in a time of 3:46.09. In a race where records are often set in fractions of a second, Billings pulled off what might be the greatest victory since Bob Beamon's long jump at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Billings, not even entered into the race, and only there to set the pace for world-record holder Aldawie Rutunda, who incidentally beat her own then-world-record-time by more than a second, Billings just kept on running right into the record book before being carried off the track by an overflowing crowd of athletes and spectators who had rushed down amidst some confusion as Billings had not been officially entered in the race.