

Echoes, Boston

The explosions don't wake you. The sirens don't either—with a hospital complex just up the street, sirens have become normal background noise. Nothing else is normal, but you don't know that yet. You were planning to go to the marathon. It's April 2013, your second spring in Boston, and you have yet to experience the Patriot's Day tradition. Instead, sandwiched in bed between your boyfriend and your fat tabby cat, you're napping off jet lag and a conference and a night of drinking—the kind your body is saying you can't handle anymore.

Then your boyfriend, your cat—somebody—stirs, and you wake from a dream that leaves a smile on your face. You grab your phone from the nightstand to check the time. A text message blinks on the screen; it's from a military friend. *Hey buddy, are you OK?* You chuckle and think he must be telepathic. *I'm fine*, you text. *Just recovering from a two-day hangover.*

You use the bathroom. Go to the kitchen for a glass of water. Hear the mattress groan as your boyfriend climbs from bed, then the click of the living room TV. Then your boyfriend yells in a voice that has shed all grogginess: “Babe, you need to call Jen to make sure she's OK.”

Sleep still clings to your voice, but now concern edges in for your friend, who lives a block from the marathon finish line. “Why? What happened?” You move to the living room while you speak. Your boyfriend and the breaking news feed tell you in sync.

Boston has been attacked. War has come home.

You were a runner once. You loved the rhythm of running. *Left right left right left right. Breathe in two three four, out two three four.* When life itself had no rhythm, there was pavement, breath, a soothing predictability in your footfalls, in the steady tick of miles. On the road, you were in complete control.

You ran before sunrise, or after sunset, often bookending 12-hour workdays but escaping the worst of the Florida heat. When you trained for your first marathon, in 2009, long runs came on weekends—farther and farther along the strip of bleached white sand that separated and connected the Gulf and the Sound, Fort Walton Beach and Destin, you and the Air Force and the rest of the world. When you ran you left your Blackberry at home, untethered yourself from the Air Force base public affairs office for a few blissful miles. You found peace on the road.

You can't move from the couch. The news plays in fragmented loops: One blast at the finish line. Sixteen seconds later, a block east, another blast. At least three people killed. Scores injured. The bombs may have been in trashcans. They may have been remotely detonated. Smoke and chaos and blood.

There's no new information, certainly not anything definitive. You know nothing can be seen clearly through the immediate fog of war. Your friends are all safe. You were amazed by the speed of accountability aided by social media and text messages, at the concern reaching out from all corners of the country. In his texts and Facebook posts, your boyfriend speaks from a place of authority: from Afghanistan convoy operations and daisy-chained explosives. "Stay away from the scene," he says. "Only two devices went off. There could be more."

There are no more explosions, but the injury count climbs. It will surpass 260. Sixteen people will lose legs. In the news images, smoke shrouds the familiar street, a veiled time capsule of your year and a half in Boston: The library where you studied for graduate school classes. The hotel with the plush-couched bar where you celebrated your 28th birthday. Your favorite brunch spot, ground zero for the second explosion and barely identifiable with blown-out windows and a shrapnel-splintered facade. The square in front of Trinity Church that marks the passing of seasons with a farmers' market, the Boston Book Festival, a massive Christmas tree and a 20-foot menorah. Now, discarded cups and water bottles, shattered glass and bits of clothing scatter like morbid confetti. Dark red stains mark the sidewalks. You have seen blood like this before, but here, at home, your brain struggles to accept it.

In photos, the finish line clock is frozen at 4:09.52. Faces are stuck in a kaleidoscope of terror and agony and disbelief, mouths caught in an endless, silent scream. You scan the faces. Your body wrestles with itself, trying to absorb their pain and push it away. You know violence, and Boston is your city, too. But you're safe on your couch; you have no right to this pain. Somewhere in the hazy, panicked crowd are the Tsarnaev brothers. You don't know about them yet; you can still hold onto hope: That the attacker isn't a veteran; a new poster boy or girl for PTSD. That this wasn't an act of religious extremism.

You witnessed religious extremism in Afghanistan. Every day you remind yourself of the gentleness of most people you met there, the rose garden your military team's interpreter cultivated—unexpected and beautiful—in the gravel courtyard on base, the way the old woman's smile reminded you of your grandmother. You envied the fierce determination of your Afghan cultural advisor, the conviction in his eyes when he spoke of working to better his country. Every

day you remind yourself of the violence on all sides, the few whose actions ripple to the many. Every day you fight the instinct to hate.

On the news you watch figures moving through the dust and debris, people running toward the blast sites to move rubble and carry victims to safety. Some of the first responders wear military uniforms. You wonder if you had been there, in or out of uniform, which direction you would run.

Before your marathon, the Air Force sent you to Africa. A month of long days handling media for a military exercise outside Bamako, Mali, no gym or track or level roads in a secure location, brutal heat though it was November; you were certain the trip would disrupt marathon training. You did lose some training miles. But you found something, too: a pleasure different from the peace of solitary runs.

After finishing your daily work, when the hot sun began to slip below the horizon, you often joined a group of other officers for a run. In Air Force shorts, brown uniform undershirts and tennis shoes that quickly turned a matching shade of brown, you jogged down the riveted, dirt path of the air field, then turned at random down one of the many trails that wove through thickets of chest-high grass. For a minute, it was like a corn maze, golden walls on every side. You watched the backs of men in front of you, tracing their strides to avoid divots and loose stones. Then you were crossing the main street into the local village, dodging donkey-drawn carts and passing mud huts with thatched roofs. You waved to men herding goats and women hanging brightly colored laundry, and they smiled and waved back. Children seemed to appear out of nowhere, first one, then two, then a gaggle falling in uneven step behind you, giggling at

your broken Malian greetings. Your tongue was clumsy with the language, but it didn't matter; joy—and running, it seemed—crossed all cultural boundaries.

After the bombing, it takes you a while to understand the feeling. At first, it's covered by disbelief. Then anger. Then there's a sadness that burrows deep. Three people are dead. You don't know them, but you could. You might have passed them on the street. Sat next to them at a Red Sox game. Jostled into them on the subway. In the youngest victim, 8-year-old Martin Richard, you see the African children skipping behind you, the shaggy-haired Afghan kids crowding around your convoy, reaching for the crayons and candy you stuffed in your cargo pockets. You wanted to take a little girl home with you, the one with the pink dress and the smudge of flour on her nose. The youngest amputee is a seven-year-old girl.

You see your sister rounding the corner to the finish line of the last summer's marathon in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and your two-year-old niece jumping up and down and clapping her hands. Tamerlan, the elder Tsarnaev brother, who was mortally wounded in the post-bombing police chase, had a daughter not much older. Her life will probably forever be filtered through this day. She will grow up fatherless. But at least she will grow up. The sadness bores deeper. Then you scold yourself for being selfish. This tragedy didn't happen to you. You are unharmed, and there's nothing you can do. That's when you understand the feeling in your stomach: helplessness.

At your marathon, you were surprised at your strength. You had never run farther than 18 miles. The Houston course was flat, but each mild incline stabbed at your legs and grated your lungs. Yet your legs kept churning. *Left right left right left right. Breathe in two three four, out two three four.* The thick crowd of runners and the cheering rows of spectators propelled you forward on a wave of adrenaline and pride. It wasn't insular like your solo training runs, or scattered and carefree like Africa, but an exhilarating compromise; you were all in this together. Sometimes you forgot to count your steps and measure your breath. You just ran.

Aerosmith blared from the speakers of a pickup truck and you felt your stride quicken with the beat. A woman read your name from your sweaty, jostling bib and hollered that you were looking good. She probably said that to everyone, but you swelled with gratification anyway. A sign informed you that if you were running a half marathon you would be finished, and you mustered the energy to waggle your middle finger at its holder and smile. In front of you, a tall man with a shaggy mop of brown hair kept screaming, "We need more cowbell! Give me more cowbell!" You liked running with this man, so you left your 9:30/mile pacer. At mile 22, your legs started to waver. A spectator offered you a slice of pizza and a beer. You declined, but the exchange rallied you. Someone yelled your name: "You're almost there, Lauren!" he said. "You can do it!" and you agreed with him.

You anticipated crying when you crossed the finish line, tears of relief and accomplishment, but instead you laughed. In spite of the exhaustion and pain, the atmosphere had made the race fun. Your time was faster than expected: 4:06.54.

In a different year, in a different race, almost exactly three minutes later, the first bomb would go off.

The morning after the bombing, you wake again to the stirring of your boyfriend or your cat. Your boyfriend wraps his long arms around you and presses his face into your hair. His voice is laced with sleep. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too."

"I had violent dreams," he says. "I don't ever want anything to happen to you."

He's in Afghanistan again. Sleep often takes him there. Only rarely does it happen when he's awake. But right now you're both someplace in between, where nightmares invade real life. You could let your mind follow him to Afghanistan, try to fold yourself into his memories: Into the Humvee that suddenly explodes, engulfing the gunner, your friend, in flames. Watching the young boy run into the street to cheer for the American convoy, then the flash, the deafening boom. The hunk of metal that used to be a truck. The charred flesh fragments of the suicide bomber. And the boy, like Martin Richard, an unfortunate spectator. Collateral damage.

Your own Afghanistan memories are not so jarring. You never saw the flash or heard the boom. You never smelled the charred flesh. You never watched death in action. Once, you attended a meeting at the small outpost. You enjoyed the change of scenery, the chance to climb into the lookout tower and gaze out at the invisible line of the Pakistan border. Perhaps the suicide bomber crossed that line a week later, before sneaking onto the outpost and detonating himself outside the U.S. barracks.

On another occasion, you convoyed to a street corner a few days after an attack. Still, you scanned a million spots where the multiple suicide bombers might have stood, hating how fear

pounded beneath your body armor. You searched for bits of fabric left behind on tree branches, like a newspaper article described. You found no bloodstains on the sidewalks.

You remember the way your heart stopped when you heard about the bombing in the base gym of the neighboring province. You didn't know that could happen, that your heart could actually stop. You tried to fathom seven people gone in an instant. You superimposed the faces of your teammates on the images of the seven CIA agents, on the faces in the 17 framed photos on your forward operating base's memorial wall. You thought of seven families, then thought of your family. You tried to stop thinking. For three days, you were ordered to wear body armor whenever you went outside. For two weeks, you avoided the gym and the small shred of peace from the loose, sticky belt of the treadmill.

Sometimes you viewed violence through a lens. You didn't want to scrutinize the investigation photos taken in the wake of the Special Forces raid, but they flipped across your computer screen. No one knew what happened in the raid. It was all chaos and blood, and this evidence, pixilated carnage. In the photos, the Afghan woman was beautiful. She was younger than you. She was pregnant. And she had three bullet holes in her chest.

In these tragedies you knew you were helpless. You knew you were lucky; you were only on the fringes of violence. You also knew that at any moment it could come for you.

The night of the manhunt, April 19, you have never seen Boston's streets so quiet. You peer out your first-floor window, watching the evening shadows stretch across Huntington Avenue. Tonight, even the sirens are absent. The entire city waits, once again tuned to the news,

where, once again, sketchy details cycle in a loop. The TV transports you to neighboring Watertown, where the second bombing suspect, younger brother Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, is thought to have fled. There, the sirens congregate. Streets glow blue and red. In your mind you're transported to other places, where convoys of military vehicles, full-body armor and block-by-block home searches are normal. You practiced those tactics but never had to use them. An Internet link streams a live police tracker feed, and you recognize the acronyms, the barked orders in the steady, detached, authoritative tone. Your muscles twitch, wanting to follow the police squads, but your brain is relieved to merely watch.

Watching, waiting becomes too much, so your boyfriend puts on a movie instead. When it's over, so is the search. Tsarnaev was found in a backyard boat. You laugh at that—a boat in a city called Watertown—and your body exhales stress you didn't know you had internalized. Outside you can hear squeals and cheers, and you and your boyfriend grab your Red Sox hats and join the river of local residents flowing up the hill toward the bars. You can't help but smile. You've never seen so many happy people in this neighborhood of cold ambivalence. They literally dance in the streets. They high-five strangers. They holler: "They caught the mother fucker!" or "Boston Strong!"

You find seats at your favorite bar and toast over pints of Sam Adams 26.2, a beer brewed to celebrate the marathon. Social media clamors over the evening's events, and you post a photo of your beer and Red Sox hat as evidence of your participation. Back outside, a convoy of policemen drives by, and the crowd erupts in cheers. You clap and shriek along with them. As you walk, two young women stumble behind, singing slurred and off-key: *"I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free!"*

It's a song you've heard many times, an anthem of sorts for the military. It was the theme for Operation Desert Storm in 1991, where your mom served as an Army nurse. She played it for you when she came home, and you can still feel her emotions in every note. More than 20 years later, the song remains a staple at every homecoming ceremony, at every Veteran's Day or 4th of July celebration. In Afghanistan, you listened when you needed to believe that people in America remembered we were a country at war. For months after you returned, it always made you cry. Tonight, it irks you. Those drunken girls haven't earned the right to sing. You burn with a selfish flare, as if somehow you alone can claim the rights to tragedy, to war, to pain, to the complicated feelings involved in each.

More than proud and patriotic, you realize, the city is stir-crazy. Everyone has been cooped up in tiny apartments, anxious over the investigation, and now they have an excuse to revel. You've seen this brand of flash mob patriotism before. The gush of nationalism every Independence Day. The waving flags at Veteran's Day parades. The well-intentioned but hollow "Thank you for your service." Do they know what they're thanking you for? Do you?

And what do those lyrics mean, anyway? Free from what? Violence and bloodshed? Public massacres? Surely, you think, everyone can see now that safety is only an illusion.

It's two days before the 2015 Boston Marathon, past midnight, and the finish line is eerily quiet. Supply trucks and emergency and medical vehicles sleep in the darkened Copley Square, as if they too need to rest for the big day. There seem to be more this year, but you could be wrong. Even the steps of the public library are vacant. Probably the homeless have been carted away as the city is sectioned off for safety; you like to think they relocated for a few days

to honor this sacred ground. On the sidewalk, you're alone. Aloneness isn't common here, especially in this neighborhood, a hub for shopping and dining, mulling tourists, bus lines and duck boat tours. You've only seen stillness like this once before. Two years have passed since the manhunt. Two years since these wrought iron fences were twisted with shoelaces, covered with flowers and hand-written memorial signs. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev has recently been found guilty on all counts. The verdict brought the city an uneasy closure—an ugly chapter concluded but not forgotten.

Bleachers rise up in front of you. On Monday they will be a patchwork of umbrellas. They will tremble under stomping feet and cheers. Tonight they are sleek and cold. Tape directs you behind the bleachers, where the sidewalk runs unobstructed. Instead, you veer onto the road. You want to see the finish line. You don't know why. You've walked this street hundreds of times, even posed for pictures under the timer that now stretches overhead.

The road is still open to traffic, so you press against the barricade as you make your way slowly forward. Your boots hit the blue and yellow paint, and you stop. You close your eyes. There's a bite in the air; the forecast calls for rain. The wind prickles your face. You hear the motor of an approaching car. You open your eyes and move aside to let the sedan pass. When it's gone, you breathe in the returned quiet, then you step across the finish line. You know it's silly, but you expect to feel different, profound somehow. But nothing has changed. Silence closes in around you.

Two days later, you're finally there—not at the finish line, but two miles west. The rain has kept the crowd thin, and you slip easily into a vacant spot along the metal barricade. The people beside you are screaming. In the distance, you think you detect the metallic *bing* of a cowbell. Discarded cups and water bottles are scattered around you. Glitter blows off homemade signs. Approaching the final stretch down Boylston Street, the runners mostly look miserable, many are wrapped in silver space blankets against the wind, but you read more in their pained expressions. They have made it this far. They're almost done. The city propels them forward.

You find yourself screaming, “You're all crazy, but you're amazing!” You read a runner's name from her bib. “Looking good, Katie! You're almost there!” and “There's beer at the finish line!” Katie smiles and gives you a thumbs-up. You revel in her joy, surprised at the connection you feel to the runners, to the spectators, to the Boston police who patrol the barricades, to your city. And this *is* your city. The bombing was when you first understood that, when pain and pride spiraled so deep because this was your home.

Without realizing it, you find what you were looking for at the empty finish line two days earlier. It's not an epiphany. Still, nothing has changed. Still, you're on the fringes, at once connected and detached, in a collision zone between war and peace, idealist and skeptic, between your pre- and post-military selves. But there's unity among the strangers around you. In this moment, you share history and pain and triumph. Tomorrow it will probably be gone. You'll return to work and traffic and cold ambivalence. Maybe, like flash mob patriotism, this is only temporary. But while it's here, you can cherish it, this glimpse at the best of humanity, camaraderie's triumph over helplessness. The power of running—and war—to bring people together.