

Her Name, Followed by an Asterisk

Rich Elliott

Cora Beatty appeared one day on our track like a girl on a half shell, her face flushed, beautiful, and wide open to possibility.

I was timing the boys, and they immediately slowed, such was the distraction. The girls, on the other hand, who were already a skittish lot, greeted the newcomer with coolness.

As for me, the thing I remember was her earnestness, how she stood there, all of five feet tall, receiving instructions from Coach, how she wobbled on her spindly legs like a fawn and how she tipped her nose skyward to smell the spring air.

In her first track race Cora was not remarkable at all. We had maybe thirty girls on our distance squad, and she was just one of them way back in the masses like most freshman girls, looking a little bewildered.

But afterwards on the bus she was a character as she breathlessly recounted her race: "I mean, it was so EXCITING, all of us flying 'round the track in our colored uniforms, and OH MY GOD, I thought I couldn't keep up, and that girl from Fremont, she was so far up there, she looked AWESOME when she lapped me, and the other girls and me we were so bunched up, there were some ELBOWS let me TELL YOU, and one girl said OH, SORRY, and I said THAT'S OK, but I could hardly talk 'cause I was breathing so HARD, and did you see that girl PUKING after the finish line, oh my God it was so GROSS, I nearly puked myself, and I can see you wrote down all my lap times, you're SO SWEET."

Why Cora chose me, of all people, to sit next to on the bus, I have no idea. Me, the team manager, the lowest on the food chain. Me, who wore nerdy black glasses and who had asthma and used a puffer. Me, the team's

cheerleader, the guy who picked up sweats and handed out towels and propped up our bumbling coach. Cora, with a loud HEY, flopped down next to me, and I wasn't complaining.

"You looked great out there," I told her even though she looked like all the other plodding beginners. I encouraged her, and I like to imagine I played a role in her breakthrough even though I know I did not.

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Near our school a trail wound through the woods where our runners did their distance work. I would accompany the underclassmen on my bike to spur them on and to kind of act as a sheep dog. There was one stretch on this trail where in the spring we were tormented by red-winged blackbirds. These hateful creatures, protecting their nests, dove at our heads and screeched obscenely. The runners would speed up and try to keep the birds away by flinging gravel at them, but these birds were awfully determined.

One afternoon a blackbird hit Cora in the back of her head, and she let out a shriek. Her teammates stopped to look at her head.

"God, Cora, I see some blood," said one.

Next thing I know, little Cora is scrambling up a tree, spiderlike, and with one hand she is waving off a riot of crazed blackbirds and with her other she is grabbing a nest. She gets the nest onto the ground, it contains three speckled eggs, and she proceeds to jump on the nest until it's a gooey mess.

Some of our boy runners have stopped and are laughing and cheering, while the girls are watching speechless.

Cora finally composed herself. "WHAT?" She looked around at her teammates. "They attacked me."

After that the blackbirds did not bother us that spring.

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In Cora's next race a surprising thing happened. Halfway through she was jogging along in a clump of tired girls, but a minute later she started passing people, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Soon she was flying down the straightaways, her blond ponytail streaming behind her. The front pack came back to her as if in a zoom shot in a Hitchcock movie. Crazy! Coming off the final turn, Cora sliced through the surprised leaders and won the race going away, breaking our school record by ten seconds.

Just past the finish line, she did twenty jumping jacks.

She saw me in the infield and came bouncing over. "RON. Did you see me!? WHATDJA THINK!?"

Before I could answer, Coach ran up. "Cora, what the hell was that? Are you sure you ran all the laps? You gotta count!"

Coach had missed part of the race. Coach always missed some of the two-mile because that's when he took his cigarette break. Still, his assumption was

understandable. For this little freshman, in only her second race, to break the school record, well, things like that didn't happen.

And that was just the beginning.

On the bus Cora rocked in her seat, her legs folded under her. "RON. I tell you, it felt so EASY, it was so much FUN, I heard my mile split, and I was like WHOA, I can't run that fast, then I was passing girls left and right, I was feeling BETTER and BETTER, and then I saw you Ron, and you yelled something, but I didn't hear it, but I waved, remember? Then I could see the front pack way up there, and I thought, Well, OK, Cora, go get them, and I CAUGHT them, and they were like WHAT ARE YOU DOING up here, freshman, and I kind of shrugged, like I HAVE NO IDEA, and I felt bad for them 'cause they were having a bad day, and later I just wanted to HUG all the girls, they ran so hard, and Ron thank you so much for cheering me on, you're so SWEET."

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The trouble started quickly after. We had a sports reporter in town, Dave McCabe, a rookie who had delusions of grandeur. I think he imagined himself an investigator for the *New York Times*, instead of our weekly rag. Like one time someone from a rival team sent him photos of our football guys drinking beer at a party. McCabe made a big deal of it, leading to half our team getting suspended.

When McCabe wrote his story on Cora Beatty, he couldn't resist his perverse impulse. After gushing about Cora for most of the article, McCabe stooped to a new low, writing, "We have never witnessed a young runner like Cora Beatty run so fast so soon. Her performance is nearly too good to be believed. In light of the doping scandals in the pros, as well as Coach Swinton's past rules infractions, suspicions are not completely unwarranted. Let's hope everything is above board in Swinton's program."

McCabe's innuendo caused howls of protest from our coach and Cora's parents and the school board, but now the cloud was out there. My mom, a teacher at neighboring Milford East, told me the coaches there suspected something was rotten. They'd already asked the state sports association to look into Cora Beatty.

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By now Cora and I were an item. We went to the Spring Fling together, we danced cheek to cheek in the gym, and later, on her doorstep, she kissed me so hard my lip was swollen.

I'll admit, I was head over heels. Never before—or since—have I known a person who *felt* so deeply. She was all-in, all the time. She didn't just suck the marrow, she ate the bone.

I'd see her in the school hallway standing at a table, and she'd be advertising some charity, like Shoes for Sri Lanka, and she'd grab students and badger them until they'd hand over their Nikes right on the spot. It was pretty hilarious.

I don't know what Cora saw in me, except that I was her unquestioning ally in the chaos to come.

"RON. They're saying I'm taking some DRUG, and that's why I'm so fast!"

We were sitting in my car. She was crying on my shoulder. "Why do they SAY that? I HATE them! EVEN COACH! He asked me if I was cheating!"

"Who cares what they think?" I pushed back a rebel strand of blond hair from her forehead. "Just be you—and keep running."

"I HATE them!" She kicked her foot into the dashboard, denting the glove compartment.

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We had a Friday meet under the lights. I remember it well because I acted as a kind of assistant coach. I had extra duties because Coach had to leave school early and go to the E.R. I guess he got a case of food poisoning or something. Anyway, that made Cora's race even more memorable because I gave her all her pre-race instructions, which she then ignored.

The defending state champ was in the race. She was the heavy favorite. During the first mile, Cora ran alongside the champ, as if glued to her shoulder. Then my girlfriend began a series of cruel surges. She would throw in a sprint and then slow dramatically and wait for the champ to catch up. Cora was playing with her. At the end Cora put the hammer down, winning by nearly 200 meters, while the champ, annihilated, walk-jogged to the finish.

I found it painful to watch, how she destroyed that girl. But when you're falling for someone, it is easy to make allowances.

Cora, in just her third race, had crushed the state record and taken two seconds off the national high school record.

Instead of doing a victory lap, she flew around the track cheering on the finishing runners. Later she asked me if she could do an extra workout, "a little harder this time."

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You know that amusement park ride called the Rotor? You're spinning around in a big cylinder, plastered against the wall, and the floor drops out, and you can't believe it, and you're trying not to freak out? The following week was like that.

The media clamored for Cora's attention. Major publications wanted interviews. One running magazine announced she was the greatest thing to happen since Roger Bannister.

Dave McCabe reported that the state association had requested Cora have blood tests and a gender exam to determine whether everything was on the up

and up. Perhaps, McCabe suggested, she was taking PEDs or had some off-the-charts testosterone level.

Cora made several visits to doctors.

Cora's parents hired a lawyer. Then they added a psychologist and a PR whiz to Team Cora.

Social media was blowing up. The girls on our team started acting out. Cora didn't fit any of the normal boxes. Kay Clarkson, our former number-one runner, came up with a nickname for Cora. Kay was calling her "The Freak."

Meanwhile, our hapless coach was nominated for Coach of the Year.

It was a circus.

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It got tricky to find time alone with her. To throw off reporters, Cora snuck out of her house wearing a disguise. She met me in the alley behind Walgreens, and we drove out to Riverdale Park overlooking the Salt River.

"Wow, Cora, what a week!" I helped her take off her trench coat, fake nose, and Einstein wig. "Are you OK?"

"Am I OK?" Her chin quivered, her eyes were on fire. "Well, LET'S SEE. My teammates HATE me, Coach has TRIPLED my workouts, *Runners World* says I'm the Voice of My Generation, McCabe wonders if I'm a MAN, my parents are looking at me FUNNY, and my shrink wants to give me PILLS."

She took a breath. "Did I MISS anything?"

"Your boyfriend is in love with you?"

She pulled me to her, clutched me hard, bruising my ribs.

"I HATE all of them! I don't think I can DO THIS. None of this is my FAULT."

Then Cora told me what the doctors found.

The doctors did not believe their stethoscopes, so they took X-Rays, and then they shoved Cora's shivering frame into the MRI tube, imploring her to lie quietly. Later they repeated the MRI to make sure. Stunned, they reported their findings.

Lodged behind my girlfriend's heart there lurked another dark shape arrogantly beating in perfect synchrony.

The doctors had never seen such a thing, this twin heart. A review of medical history uncovered only one other case, that of a three-legged man who performed for P.T. Barnum; his autopsy revealed two hearts. The incidence of two-heartedness was so unusual there were no statistics for it.

"Well, I knew you were special," I told her, taking a quick draft on my puffer.

"The doctors told me that the stronger my leg muscles get, the more I'll be able to process the double-dose of oxygen I'm getting," she said. "Basically, I'm a freak."

"Welcome to the club," I said.

"Some club."

I put my head against her chest and listened. The beating of those hearts was thrilling and deeply base, like being high up in a cathedral, rich, bold, and scary.

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Before the meet started, people in the stands spoke in hushed tones about the accident.

Dave McCabe had arranged an interview with Kay Clarkson, ostensibly to get a different angle on the Cora Beatty story. What did her teammates think of her incredible success? How did all the hysteria affect the team? Perhaps McCabe was fishing for dirt, but no one would know because he never wrote the story.

The interview took place at the local Burgers 'N Stuff, a popular hangout for students. Apparently, McCabe offered to give Kay a ride home, which was a stupid rookie mistake because of how it looked later. The police report stated that a brake malfunction caused the car to fly off the curve on Everly Road. The car was found upside down at the bottom of a ravine. The reporter and the girl were extracted from the wreckage and pronounced dead on arrival at St. Jude's.

So Cora's race that day became a welcome distraction to an awful week, and she did not disappoint.

Looking back on it, I'm surprised she could run at all given the ridiculous atmosphere. The state association had decided to let Cora run while they tried to figure out what to do about her, if anything. Now, at the meet, wherever she went, a crowd of autograph seekers, photographers, and reporters chased her. A phalanx of our track guys surrounded her so she could do her warm-up; after which the boys were so exhausted, they had to scratch from their races.

Inside the stadium it was bedlam. The security cordon broke, and fans poured onto the track, leaving only one lane for the runners. A Channel Two van was tipped over. The turns prickled with nests of telephoto lenses. In the stands grade school girls wore Cora Beatty T-shirts and screamed and fainted as if at a rock concert. Pockets of high school girls sat refusing to race—they carried signs that read "Boycott All Cheaters."

But then her race began, and oh, boy! An eerie silence fell over the crowd as they realized they were witnessing something mystical. Cora leaned into a breathtaking pace. Lap after lap she slashed through the channel of fans on the track, her arms chopping across her chest, her legs a blur. I stood in awe, thinking of those two furious beating hearts.

Coaches shook their heads at Cora's intermediate times; they tapped their watches in disbelief. What else can you do in the presence of such a thing? To watch that tiny sprite moving at world-record speed—well, it was a sight.

Cora ate through her final laps like some predator on the savannah. Her last lap was an all-out sprint. She was majestic. We spectators stared hard,

trying to etch it into our memories and knowing we'd never see anything like it again.

Cora exploded down the final straightaway and ripped through the finish tape, raising high both her middle fingers. Then she flew out an exit tunnel and vanished.

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She wouldn't return my texts. All that night I fretted. I didn't see her until early the next day, a Sunday morning. I heard a honk from the street below, and I went outside, and there she was, standing in my front yard. Her parents sat in their car, engine idling. They stared straight ahead. Behind the car was a U-Haul trailer.

Cora stepped close to me.

"I feel terrible about Kay, about McCabe, about everything," she said.

"Well, you sure didn't let it affect your race. You were brilliant! My God, Cora, a world record!"

"Ron, I'm moving away. My dad just found out. We have to move a lot because of his job."

"But." I resisted the urge to pull out my puffer. "You haven't even finished the season."

"Ron, you think I'm so wonderful. You don't know me."

I held her for a while. She was already miles away. Through her thin T-shirt I felt her heartbeats. The beats seemed off, two fierce dueling drummers.

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Cora's record is still listed if you care to look it up. Her name is always shown with an asterisk. The notation for the asterisk is cowardly—it simply states "unsanctioned record."

When you are young, you get over girls quickly. At least I thought that was the case. For a long time I tried not to think about her. But lately I find myself poking around the Internet. Call it curiosity.

As far as I can tell, Cora never raced again, but she became famous in another way. She married a wealthy investment banker, and she became a celebrated humanitarian. She's one of those women who fly around the world helping people. You will see photos of her administering vaccines in Somalia or reading to a group of girls in Pakistan. She's a glamorous and beloved figure.

She never stays in one place long. In the wake of her leavings there are often reports of an unexpected death of a colleague. To make this connection took some digging, but I couldn't help myself. Those twin hearts, so lush and terrible, still hold a fascination for me.