

MARATHON MAN©

by

DAVID MUNROE

October 10, 8:47 a.m.

Eddie Kolbin placed his right foot on the back of the sofa and bent forward at the waist. A small puff of air escaped his lips as he touched the tip of his nose to his kneecap. He held the position for a moment. His hamstring stretched tight, sending a small electrical hum from calf to buttock. He repeated the procedure with his left leg, stepped back, and touched the floor three times with the palms of his hands. His gray cotton t-shirt, turned charcoal with sweat, clung to his body. He felt limber.

He moved to the center of the living room and began a lively jig, shaking out any unworked muscles. Without breaking his rhythm, he glanced at his watch. He was on schedule. The yogurt, honey, and egg milkshake he'd forced down at breakfast half an hour earlier had changed from a leaden lump in his belly to a high-octane fuel pumping through his system; he was hitting on all cylinders. The only thing left on his agenda was to run – all twenty six miles, three hundred and eighty five yards.

He could do it. One month ago he'd run the course in two hours and forty minutes. But sometimes his mind played tricks on him; sometimes he felt he was the old Eddie Kolbin: Eddie giving a final jerk to get his size fifty-six jeans up and over his mountainous ass; Eddie getting lodged between the arms of his favorite easy chair. Even now he had to glance down at his body to verify the changes. His calf muscles bunched and stretched fluidly as he warmed up – steel-spring and whalebone. His waist was narrow, his stomach flat. His t-shirt fanned out at the chest and shoulders.

He wanted to look in a mirror for a truly objective view, but he couldn't. A year and a half ago, on his first day home from the hospital, he had smashed every mirror he owned. At that time, he hadn't wanted to look at himself. No way, not until he was ready – ready to show them all.

But he was close now. The final stages of his plan were falling into place. If he broke two hours and twenty minutes today, he would order the mirror he'd been admiring in the Sears catalogue – the full-length job with the oak trim. He'd hang in on the back of the bathroom door and see the real Eddie Kolbin every time he showered.

8:59 a.m.

The temperature was twenty-two degrees Celsius; there was no chance of rain.

Before he began, Eddie clicked the mileage on his pedometer back to zero and clipped it to the waistband of his shorts. He hated using it, but he had to. Most marathon runners had relatively straightforward routes; his was twisting, repetitive, and he would have to spend most of his time remembering his lap count if he didn't use the gizmo. He preferred reflecting on his past as he ran.

He started at nine o'clock. Thickets of plants and flowers flanked the start of his route: azaleas, peonies, rhododendrons. They bathed him in a kaleidoscope of colors. He felt as though he could run through a brick wall. But Eddie knew he was running through something harder, more unyielding, than any wall. He was running through all the words, all the cruelty he had been subjected to in the past.

Words. They can't hurt you, can they, Eddie-boy.

Oh, they most certainly can: Dr. Forbes, standing at the foot of Eddie's hospital bed, his cold, cruel stethoscope lying against his chest like a rot-detecting divining rod: "You're a mess, Mr. Kolbin. You won't see your twenty-eighth birthday at this rate." Mr. Cummins, Eddie's high-school phys-ed teacher, confronting him in the change room: "Y'know, if I had my druthers, Kolbin, I wouldn't allow a big, fat slob like you to take gym with the other guys. You're a disgrace." Jim Johnson, head of the accounting department, shuffling his feet as he talks to Eddie in front of the water cooler: "Eddie. I . . . the unit has asked me to talk to you. Big guys like you . . . well, there's more of you. You have to bathe daily if"

Words. They'd all eat their words.

The turning point in Eddie's life had come on a sweltering summer night two years ago. He had run out of cigarettes just before a Bogart double-bill was about to start on the channel nine late-show. The outside air was like a blast furnace compared to the air-conditioned comfort of his apartment, but Eddie ignored the heat and headed to the store in his shuffle-flop version of a sprint. He was halfway there when the pain hit: a sledgehammer shot to the chest. Numbing jolts coursed down his left arm with the regularity of a metronome. Somehow he made it back to the apartment, clutching his Winstons weakly in his right hand. But he was in no mood for a cigarette by that time, and the Bogart double-bill had lost its importance. He lay on the couch in a fetal position, sweating, praying, and aching a deep, deadly ache. At about two o'clock that morning he finally admitted to himself that he wasn't suffering from gas pains, and he took a cab to the emergency ward at St. Michael's.

Eddie spent two weeks in intensive care and two weeks in recovery. When he wasn't being scanned, electrocardiogrammed, or sponge-bathed by some grimacing orderly, he sometimes had the privilege of Dr. Forbe's company. More than once the doctor told him how deplorable he thought it was that a twenty-two-year-old man could suffer a major myocardial infarction. But Eddie didn't have to hear the words to feel the doctor's disgust; he could see it on his face.

Eddie had no visitors during his convalescence. Both his parents were dead; he had no other relatives, he had no friends. But he didn't care. His plan was starting to crystalize, and he needed time and space to put it in order.

10:00 a.m.

Eddie rounded a turn and passed a large stand of dogwood. He loved this part of the course. It seemed an endless path of lush foliage, pumping pure, unfettered oxygen into the air. He maintained an easy stride as he glanced at his pedometer: eleven miles. He was right on schedule; but then, he's been right on schedule since the day he left the hospital. Admittedly, the first year had been hard. He had always felt hungry and tired. Not a day went by when he didn't long for a bag of salt 'n' vinegar chips, a slice of sweet-and-sour rye smothered in butter, or a tall, cold glass of beer. And when he walked (a mile at a time was all he could manage at the start), his heart beat against his ribcage with terrifying force.

Everything was an uncertainty in the beginning. As he got leaner, healthier, he even worried about losing his disability insurance. But he lucked out there. The doctor handling his

case was young, barely out of internship, and working on government contract. After their first few meetings, Eddie knew he had two years' insurance under wraps. He could read the fear on the doctor's smooth face: *if I send you back to work and you drop dead on me, it would not be an auspicious start to a long, illustrious career.* Eddie hadn't bothered seeing him in seven months now.

By the end of that first year, his weight had dropped to one-ninety-eight, and he was running twelve miles a day. His motivation kicked into overdrive then. He felt reasonably sure he could not only compete in the Big One – the Boston Marathon – within the next twelve months, but could challenge in it as well.

And why not? He wasn't running for the same reasons other people ran. He was running for revenge. And when he'd completed his first marathon, fifteen months into his metamorphosis, he dreamt his sweet revenge all the way through it. He imagined he was back on his old high-school track, running the course with dear Mr. Cummins, ex-world-class decathlete, enduring world-class bully. "C'mon," Eddie had grunted, in the same gruff, needling tones Mr. Cummins had always used on him. "Pick 'em up and put 'em down, lard bucket."

Eddie completed that first one in the very respectable time of three hours and three minutes.

11:00 a.m.

The temperature was still twenty-two degrees Celsius. Eddie glanced at his watch, then his pedometer: 22.2 miles. His shorts and shirt clung to his body, but he still felt good. He

estimated his finishing time at two-hours-and-nineteen minutes. Excellent. In the six months till Boston, he would have to pare a paltry ten minutes from his time to be in the mix.

As Eddie passed a thicket of rhododendrons, their pink and yellow tubular flowers seemed to stand up and salute. They smelled sweet to him – sweet like the smell of success. Eddie wondered if Jim Johnson and the rest of his sensitive co-workers would think he smelled when he won the whole shootin' match later this year. Eddie figured they wouldn't. In fact, he decided he'd pack up his running clothes (right down to the jock), unwashed, and mail it to them. They could gather around and sniff. They'd like that. The running gear of lean, clean Eddie Kolbin, world-champion marathon runner. Yes, that would be quite a souvenir.

When he won.

Perhaps Mr. Cummins would turn to the sports pages the next day and say, "Yes, by God, I think that is *the* Eddie Kolbin." And perhaps Eddie would pay Dr. Forbes a visit and see if that piece of refuse was still repulsed by his presence; perhaps all of these things would come to pass.

Eddie checked his pedometer. He was approaching twenty-three miles. He knew he would be hitting 'the wall' very soon. It rarely varied for him. Somewhere between twenty-three and twenty-three-and-a-half miles, his lungs would feel like punctured footballs, his leg muscles like worn elastic. He would have to run on automatic pilot for a mile or so, but he knew he could do it. He had done it before.

Then it came – in great, sweeping waves. Eddie lurched, gritted his teeth, and began to think of finish lines, adoring mobs. He could see them lined up on either side of him, cheering,

screaming his name: Eddie . . . Eddie . . . Eddie Their upturned faces were wide-eyed with adoration.

And for a fleeting moment this vision blocked all pain.

An instant later, what felt like a cold band of steel enveloped him, wrapping around his chest, squeezing with a sickening familiarity. The scream of the crowd changed to a dull roar as he stumbled. He tried to yell "NO" but it escaped his purple lips as a mangled gasp. His arms, now numb and lifeless, flapped uselessly at his sides. His knees buckled, but through momentum and electrical impulses he managed three more steps in a staggering duck walk before sprawling face first onto the path.

It was 11:03 a.m.

October 24, 10:00 a.m.

The woman standing across from officer Donaldson was small and prim. Her iron-gray hair was pulled back in a tight little bun. She clutched the front of her housecoat in a white-knuckled grip, as if she didn't trust the buttons to do the whole job. Everything about Mrs. Seabrooke seemed locked up tight – except her lips, Donaldson thought humorlessly.

"And how long had you known Mr. Kolbin?" He asked.

"Known?" she said. "I never knew Mr. Kolbin. I don't think anybody knew him. He moved into the apartment across from me about three years ago. Lord, was he fat. A humongous man. Anyway, for the first year or so, I'd see him coming home from work, usually with a Seven-Eleven bag crammed full of goodies. Then nothing – neither hide nor hair of him.

Well, about a year-and-a-half ago, I started hearing strange noises coming from his apartment. Construction noises. That's not allowed in this building, and I tell you, I had a good mind to phone management on him." Her small hands fluttered from her housecoat, perching on her hips.

Donaldson looked up from his notepad. "Anything else, Mrs. Seabrooke?"

"Lordy, yes. After them construction noises stopped, the thump, thump, thump noises started. Two, maybe three hours a day, like he was holding a one-man hoedown in his apartment. But I still never saw him. I don't think he ever left his place, at least not that I knew about."

Donaldson marked down, 'never left apartment?'

"But it was the smell that really made me take notice," Mrs. Seabrooke continued. "That and the lack of noise. I thought that perhaps he'd snuck off without paying the rent and maybe left his freezer unplugged. I had no idea that this----"

"Thank you, Mrs. Seabrooke," Donaldson said. "That will be all for now." He stepped back and opened the door to Kolbin's apartment. Mrs. Seabrooke moved forward, craning her neck, trying to peek around him.

Donaldson unceremoniously closed the door in her face. The ambulance crew had Kolbin's body on a stretcher and were now zipping up the body bag. Donaldson shook his head and stepped around them.

He moved past the knot of furniture in the middle of the living room and stepped into the pathway that ran the perimeter of the apartment. He knelt and looked at the floor-covering:

Astroturf. It was worn and frayed in the middle, down to the hardwood in spots, but was still emerald green where it hugged the flower-planters. He followed the path through the roughly constructed doorway to the bedroom. Like a big-game hunter, he pulled apart some overgrown ferns in the planter before him and surveyed the scene.

The bedroom furniture was huddled together in the middle of the room, too. A bed, a dresser, and a chair.

He followed the path out of the bedroom and down the hallway. More planters – plants as far as he could see. He stepped through another rough-hewn doorway and back into the living room.

Donaldson was truly puzzled. The world lay just outside this man's apartment, yet he'd gone to the enormous trouble of recreating it indoors.

He pulled out his notepad. Agophobia? No. Agraphobia? No, that wasn't it, either. He licked the tip of his pen, jotted down 'housewife's syndrome', and put the pad back in his pocket.

He would be able to look up the word back at the office, but he'd never know for sure if that was the answer. The only man who did was on his way to the morgue.

THE END