



10-16-2018

2003 (excerpt)

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Recommended Citation

Cook, Caroline E. (2018) "2003 (excerpt)," *HUMBUG*: Vol. 2018: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/humbug/vol2018/iss2/3>

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Cover Page Footnote

This piece was written and workshopped in 18X and brought into workshop in progress. Because we operate under a workshop model, we see value in an unfinished piece. This piece was presented as a branch piece.

2003 (excerpt)

He looked out the window, the little one above the sink in the kitchen. He smiled at the sky turning pink above the tree line and silhouettes of telephone wires weighed down with birds. The sun was rising. It was time to go.

He sat down at a stool in the kitchen and put his running shoes down in front of him on the linoleum tile. They were gray—they'd always been gray, even when they were new, but there was an exhausted, dusty gray that settled into them after the first thousand miles. The laces had stiffened with dirt and sweat. They were sick of being yanked in his calloused hands the way he always methodically double-knotted them. The pieces of plastic on the ends clicked together with the satisfying sound of a bell, a call to prayer, a quiet bold start to the day.

He stood up and walked to the freezer covered with magnets the kids had made: half of a walnut, painted to look like a ladybug, bearing the responsibility of the glossy calendar with a seriousness its googly-eyes betrayed. Below it were pictures of kids with gap-toothed smiles wearing necklaces made of Fruit Loops. They were good kids, and his smile in those pictures was genuine, but so was the exhaustion in his eyes. He was glad they were asleep, at least for now. He opened the freezer door and took out a frozen Gatorade. The bottle—the blue one, it had to be the blue one, glacier berry or something, because he always said you had to control what you could, and he couldn't control the weather or the fact that he hadn't gotten any sleep last night, but he could control the flavor of Gatorade in his freezer. The frozen bottle left a trail of water on his fingertips.

The watch on his wrist, a GPS the size of his Motorola RAZR, was secured with industrial Velcro. The GPS took six or seven minutes to find him on Earth, even though every run started in the same place. By the time he got outside, it had found him, and proudly chirped. He walked to the end of the driveway, the smell of Wednesday morning and fresh mulch and age thirty-five hung in the air. It was sweet, and a little cold, and the sky was still mostly dark, but he knew the sun would be up by the time he got home. He set the Gatorade down in the grass, blades sticking to the wet plastic, and leaned it against the mailbox. The neighbors next door, the elderly couple who wore turtlenecks in the summer, were already awake, and they were dragging their trashcans to the curb. They exchanged their good-mornings, and with a laugh joked about how he was always out—always out—running again?

They didn't understand a lot about him, but it was easier to talk about the running. The sixty-year-old woman who took out the trash while wearing pearls and identical cardigan sweaters every day found it easier to talk about marathons than the fact that he was a stay-at-home dad.

It was 2003, and he was training for the Boston Marathon. The neighbors—and everyone, actually—were confused, impressed. What about the staple in his lung? How could he run until his chest hurt, only to come home and take care of those two little kids all day? But they didn't understand that this was the only quiet part of his day. The sun didn't ask him to open a juice box or insist he play along with a game with rules that changed. The telephone wires didn't start crying if they got hungry, and the birds fought with each other in a language that, at least, he didn't understand. All his shoes ever asked him to do was run. And that, he could do.