

Jake Wrenn

The Accidental Marathon

He woke up and ran. The decision required no thought. It was already happening and there was no helping it. This was a movie and it wasn't his legs that were moving, it was somebody else's, but it was his lungs that were pumping and his mind that was filling. One moment he was asleep, dreaming, feeling stale, and the next he was up, on his feet, in his shoes, socks, shorts, headband, wristbands, running. He didn't set an alarm, he just woke up. The sun hadn't even risen, he hadn't even known he owned wristbands, he just got out of the house and ran, as fast as he could, down Highland into downtown, past the train station, past the bored and restless faces. They looked so angry, he remembered thinking. Something about the cold, and the early morning. He knew he would in their place be angry and cold but he wasn't, he was only watching them be angry and cold. He was sweating and tired but the adrenaline flowed almost instantly. The moment he got out of bed he was awake and focused on everything, the stain on the carpet and the smell of air freshener. It was so cold, but it only added to the rush, the freezing air that hurt in his lungs. He felt his lungs, his internal organs, they were beating and he felt the pain, for the first time in memory, maybe ever, he could feel the air go into his lungs and he could feel the instant shock, and there was a new pain that he'd never known. His focus was on everything, the Halloween displays in the store windows, the stray cat running at the slightest disturbance, the broken bottle outside the bar, the echoes of the steel on steel as the train approached, the lonely headlight.

Later that morning, Sarah would ask *what has gotten into you* with a smile.

The suburb was quiet. The businesses of downtown were wiping down their windows, hoping for customers, this day would be the day. The store owners smoked cigarettes and watched as he ran by.

He passed the bakery featured on *The Food Network* for their gourmet doughnuts, featured in *Business Times* for their efficient use of process

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management. He passed the cemetery. He passed houses with fenced-off swimming pools. He passed Town Hall.

He felt his muscles pulse as he ran down the street. The lights of the storefronts and the headlights and the streetlamps were contributing their glows, and he was pushing the earth underneath him. He saw a man sitting on the curb. He saw a child in a car. He saw a woman walking her dog. He heard a cricket in its last stretches of life. He ran, faster now, without justification, just ran.

The stairs creaked as he ran up to his apartment. The smell of burnt coffee and burnt sausage greeted him, the house smelt afire and it was a mystery why the air was so clear and smokeless, why the apartment wasn't blinded with smoke alarms and fire trucks, how everything was so calm.

"Where you been?" she asked. Sarah was so calm. She wasn't sweating and panting. She was tranquil, impossibly so. Sarah wore spaghetti straps even in forty-degree weather. She got excited about raffles.

He was trying to catch his breath. The room was spinning and his adrenaline was hurting his eyes. He was ready to fight and make love and call his best friend from high school to say sorry, man, sorry about that time with Leslie Peterson, that was so dumb, but I love you and I think we should hang out, just catch up because it's been so long. God it's been so long.

"Out," he said. His blue eyes were red.

"Out?" she asked. She wasn't skeptical, just curious. Each of her looks and her words were curious, because he was acting curious, more so than ever.

"Yeah, just, you know," he was still panting, the room was on fire, he was cursing to himself how she could be so calm, she looked good, she always looked good in the morning, she looked sexy, barely wearing anything, natural, and she was so calm, he envied her abilities, how she could just stand there when the world was so cold outside and how she could just stare when he wanted to get in the car and go across the country, or start taking a class at the community college, just start. "Just went for a run."

"Really?" she asked.

"Yeah, you know."

It was his best argument. He was starting to calm. He was losing the high and he didn't want to lose it, but he wanted to be calm, he wanted to keep sweating and running even if it hurt, because it did hurt, every step hurt, even if it was impossible to move the earth under his feet he wanted to keep trying, because that's the only way you move the earth, is by trying, even though it hurts and even if there is fire all around, you try and you fail but you tried.

He undressed in the bathroom. He pulled her in with him. Even though he was losing his high he did something crazy, something he knew she wouldn't go for, but she did. His assumptions were dying. She didn't get in the shower but they kissed and she put her arms over his arms, traced the form of his back, felt his sweat, kissed his chest, and he was still feeling strong, his thoughts weren't words but emotion, raw emotion, pictures of what he wanted, even if he was starting to tire and even if his breathing had steadied he was still loving every second of it, regretting every place she didn't touch and knowing that each of those opportunities only came once if ever. She left him in the bathroom, looking back as she closed the door, looking disheveled and innocent like they were both so new to sex that they almost didn't know what to do, but it was exciting and they wanted to try, again and again and again until they got it right, because they would get it right, just give it time. They were both smiling. She was still smiling when he got out, when he was drying his hair and when he leaned over the couch to kiss her, she was smiling, and she was still smiling when she fixed his tie straight. She would always do this. When they first moved in together she would kiss him with Listerine breath and use two hands to fix his tie, but his ties were always straight now. He was in a work routine of working and waking up for his routine but this morning it was crooked and she fixed it, hugging him with her chin against his chest and listening to his heart still beating strong.

He ran to his car. It was a decision. It hurt to run but it felt great and he ran and the air rushed in his ears like a great wind, and it was his wind and he was producing this energy, a great large windmill that was powering the Midwest, his tie helpless over one shoulder. He took the steps two at a time down the first flight then two at a time down the second flight. He was scaling his flights and staying grounded, not making a sound and being as loud as possible. To him it was the same. The sounds had no meaning, and he was down the stairs faster than he had ever been down those stairs. They had lived in that apartment for two years and never, not once, had he been in a rush to get out of the apartment and onto solid earth. The wood of the stairs couldn't compare to real, solid earth, to soil or gravel, because the wood of the stairs was dead and death spread to everything it touched.

His car wasn't as cold as it should have been, as it normally was, and he drove to work, slowly, listening to the music and dissecting everything that was said. He ate the quarter notes and picked the power chords out of the air. Houses turned to storefronts turned to offices.

He jumped out of the car, barely clicking the door shut before getting into his run. On the way to the building, he ran past Bob from Accounts Receivable and Trevor his boss and Gregory his boss's boss and Tina the exec he never had the nerve to ask out but man does she know how to wear a pantsuit and a homeless man asking for change and he ran despite the looks they were giving, he just ran. He ran past his best friend Jim who was a CPA since the age of twenty and always swore he could tell the difference between Coke and Pepsi.

“Where are you in such a rush to?” Jim asked.

“Off to kill you all,” James said, and Jim laughed.

Jim and James were off to kill the office, their definition of the friendship, both fantasizing about burning down the cubicles or shooting every computer with a pellet gun. It wasn't about the violence and they didn't want to hurt anyone. In truth neither of them particularly disliked their jobs, the joke only started as another joke from another place. It wasn't about violence or pain, it was about destruction, seeing the things they saw for every minute of every day and seeing them burn, seeing what they looked like from the inside out, in panic, in chaos.

“Went for a run today,” James said, talking to Jim.

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh yeah.”

“I can tell,” Jim said.

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Well I'm thinking about breaking in and robbing one of the houses on the block. Gotta do surveillance first. That's the hardest part. I figure, a jogger waking up early running around the neighborhood, it's the perfect cover. This house is completely empty from six to eight a.m. Perfect timing.”

“Yes,” Jim said, catching the enthusiasm. “I've never trusted joggers.”

“You shouldn't,” James said.

He was taking laps around the office. The VPs were watching through the windows, smiling. The interns were watching. Accounts Receivable was watching. Accounting was watching. The CEO and the CFO and the CCO were watching. They watched from the offices. They were laughing. He made the CEO laugh. The saleswomen were smiling and the salesmen were saying, “hold on a minute, I'm gonna have to call you back,” and they were all watching.

“He's gone crazy.”

“He's absolutely gone crazy.”

“I'm running a marathon! Get your bids in now! A 5K in fifteen minutes! Call Guinness! Call the media! World Record!”

Accounts Receivable was smiling and one of the interns was holding up her phone, filming him running and shouting and the whole office was laughing. Accounting had their heads popped out of the cubicles. Accounting was whispering that the world record for a 5K was under fifteen minutes, James from Sales wasn't breaking a record, he was running for nothing, he'd have to run faster to get into Guinness. Even HR came out from the annex to watch, to see what the commotion was, to see what was happening. HR never came out of the annex. They were glued to the annex. They were getting married to the annex.

He ran out the office and ran to his car. There was the Olympiad and “The Star Spangled Banner” and “Ode to Joy” all playing in his head at once, cheering him on. He drove home slowly. He took off his tie and

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He was thinking: *Baby if I could run, I would.*

thought about throwing it out the window. He stared at other drivers. He used his turn signal. He parked on the street. He ran out of his car and ran down the block and ran up the wooden, dead stairs and back to his apartment.

"Baby, baby, baby," he said, running up the stairs, opening the door. "You doing anything right now? Baby come on we gotta go."

She was on the phone and staring at him. He was scrambling around the apartment, too much energy if ever energy could be had to excess, and she was smiling and said, "I'll call you back," before hanging up the phone.

"Baby we gotta go," he said. "We got a long drive ahead of us."

She was asking *what the hell happened* but she followed him anyway, struggling to keep up as he ran to the car. He ran so fast. She smiled at seeing him run so fast. It was impossible to see that much enthusiasm and not catch it. He opened the passenger door even though she was half a block behind, jogging to catch up, and he started the car, accelerating out of the spot with doors swinging open and swinging into the other cars. He left a dent on a Suburban and left no note, and she asked, again, *what the hell happened*.

"Baby you gotta marry me," he said. He wasn't calm, nor would he be, but he was trying his best. It was an imperative. It had to happen. She was shelter, she was air, she was food water sex, she was everything to him. "I think this is it, and I just don't see how I can wake up tomorrow knowing you're not gonna marry me, we have to."

She was struggling. There was an excitement about him that made it impossible to say no, that made her forget the consequences or the implications. But saying no because of consequences or implications is a betrayal of the self, of the subconscious, of the id or the ego, and it made sense in terms of psychology or sociology or whatever and all that which she had studied. There was a weight lifted by saying sure. By giving in. By running to catch up to the car.

"Where are we going?"

"We've gotta go see your parents," he said, as if the answer was obvious and it was her fault for not understanding. He breathed. "We've gotta do this and we've gotta do this right, I've gotta go ask your dad if I can marry you before I can ask you if I can marry you."

She was thinking: *We're driving to Chicago?*

He was thinking: *Baby if I could run, I would.*

It was two hours of highway, of traffic, of sitting in the unmoving slow impossible traffic, and of talking about their life together. Things were happening so quickly that neither of them could stand sitting still. It hurt to sit still, unmoving, like they were late and all their friends, their parents, their coworkers, they were all waiting and they were late and they were

being left behind. Their friends were there, and here they were, stuck, in four lanes moving to one. They were trapped. The claustrophobia. The car. The countless hundreds, thousands of other things they could be doing with their time. The traffic wouldn't move and it shouldn't have been more than an hour to Chicago but they were stuck, unmoving, pressing the horn and talking about each other, listing the reasons why they couldn't stand to be apart, quantifying or qualifying love, because at that time love could be both quantified and qualified. They were practically undressing in their seats, but the road opened and they were at her parents' house.

He ran to the door and she followed. "Sarah," her mother said, surprised. "James, how are you?"

He was calm. Instantly. Somehow, he was calm. He was looking her mother in the eye, he was confident, cool, he was smiling and happy. Sarah smiled and her mother was smiling, happy. They ran to the door together and now he was calm.

"Hello," James said, kissing her mother on the cheek.

They were barely in the door, they were still wearing their coats, the house and the room and the people were all still so exciting. "We have something to tell you."

Sarah's mother knew it was coming. She had to know what they were going to say. They wouldn't have been this excited if Sarah were pregnant. She would've had a defensive tone and would've told them over the phone. They wouldn't have looked like they rhymed, because at that time they matched, they rhymed. They wouldn't have run to the door. They had to have been getting married.

"We're getting married," Sarah said, with more excitement than her mother had expected.

Her mother was about to react.

"I've been training for a marathon," James said. He waited before saying anything more. He was expecting one of them to say something. They were waiting, in confusion, in silence, unsure of where to go, what to say, confused by the other people around them. They were waiting for it to make sense. "Yeah. I knew it would be a really good thing to do. It's just like this big challenge that seems impossible, but I know that if I put my mind to it, I can do it. I'm pretty sure I can do it." He was staring at Sarah, at her mother, studying their reactions. "Yeah. I can do it. I'll be able to."

They both looked at him, confused, but excited, happy for him and for each other and for everything.

They celebrated and toasted the future, and they slept in Sarah's old room because both were too drunk to make the ride back, and his car didn't have working headlights so they wouldn't have been able to drive back even if they wanted to, and they woke up the next morning like they did every morning. This morning was like the last morning and James didn't even think about running, he just did it, he ran, out of bed and into the street, running.