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The Big Bang

A cold crisp breeze blew across my face, numbing my cheeks and nose. My fingertips tingled, exposed to the chilled air. Not even two weeks ago it had been sunny and seventy degrees, and now it was below forty as several specks of snow drifted down, dissolving into wet dots on the pale sidewalk that laid before me. Wispy clouds danced through the never ending grey sky hanging over my head. Another breeze blew past, it was longer and stronger this time, blowing my blonde baby hairs into my eyes, chilling my exposed scalp, where gaps existed between the six cornrows my sister had braided the night before. I turned my head to avoid the wind from hitting my face and heard the white gold and sparkly ribbon tied into a bow on my ponytail scrap against the hood of my heathered red sweatshirt.

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*We had tied bows in each others hair on the bus ride to the meet. I was nervous and on edge to be competing as part of the varsity race. I feared letting my team down. Following the muddy race, the varsity team had lined up, showing off our white gold ribbons, and mud splashed legs.*

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Here I was three years later. I stood at the start line in box four—that was created by the use of bright orange spray paint—preparing for what could possibly be my last high school cross country race; I wore the same spikes that I'd worn through four years of races, and the same ribbon from my freshman year was tied onto my ponytail. A fresh wave of nervous thoughts buzzed through my body—the same feeling I had a few years back. Instead of fear of letting the team down, I feared letting Renner—my coach—down, a slender man with buzzed brown hair and a trimmed beard. I feared letting my dad—with greying hair most likely from the stress us nine kids put on him and his small framed glasses he wears on top of his blue eyes—down. He has always been my number one supporter in all the sports I participated

in, and he always held high hopes and expectations for me, since he ran and played sports himself in high school. I didn't want to let either of them down. I didn't want to let myself down. Although it might be seen as petty, overall, I feared my freshman sister—Sarah—beating me like she'd done previously in the season; *if Sarah beats me, I might die a little inside*, I had thought.

All the fear struck me down like a bulldozer, diminishing my self-confidence, as I stood by the starting line with my teammates and Renner.

“Are you ready?” Renner glanced at me and questioned.

“No,” I bluntly answered him.

“Why, it's Regionals?” he countered my reply as if there had to be a logical answer for my lack of readiness.

“Because,” I chirped back while staring at the ground. I didn't feel like explaining myself. Saying my fears out loud would have brought them to life into the monster they already were, eating away any confidence that remained. Renner said nothing else, not pushing any further for the answers he sought, and I was grateful although I didn't show it.

Along side me stood Sarah, Dani, and Juju—two of my closest friends on the varsity team—and they all wore the same all black uniform, with a royal blue *HC* printed on the chest. Sarah's thick brown hair was nothing like my own short thin blonde hair, but we both shared the same deep blue eyes. Dani stood a mere five foot and two inches tall, but carried her stature confidently. The only other person I entrusted

with my demons of fear was Juju. Her fiery red hair complimented her freckled and pale porcelain skin. Her natural ability to make up for all of the confidence I lacked in myself came from her kind words and caring hazel eyes, that stood out among the rest of her features.

I kneeled down placing my left knee on the stiff cold ground to adjust my laces; I wore my grey with bright pink striped Puma shoes. The Puma logo laid on the outer side of each shoe while six silver spikes with dulled tips—from many uses during the ongoing season—protruding from each shoe were covered in a ring of dirt caked on the base and covered with crunchy remnants of leaves, and few blades of grass. I pulled my hands out from the safety of my layers of sleeves, and grasped the thick black laces. Cold air immediately bit the tops of my hands, and ate at my knuckles while I untied and retied the laces; I rocked my ankle back-and-forth to check and make sure I achieved the perfect level of tightness—not too tight but not too loose. When I was satisfied with the job I had done, I switched legs and went to work on retying the left shoe. Once finished, I tucked my hands back into my sleeves and stood up off of the ground. The varsity girls then took a jog out from our box, ending about 200 meters from the line. We gathered in a huddle, half to close the proximity for our pre-race pep-talk, and half to conceal each other from the brutality of the cold wind on our faces.

“Okay guys,” I said to begin the talk since I was captain of the team. “Today could be the last race of our season. Race your hearts out. Give it your all. This is it—this is what we’ve been working towards!” I was talking to my team, but mostly I was talking to myself. I took a long pause to collect my thoughts. “No matter the outcome, I am proud of you guys. I could not have asked for six better teammates to run my senior year with.” Tears threatened to sting my eyes, and I had nothing left to say. *This is it*, I thought. There was nothing left to do.

“Five minutes until the gun ladies,” the Starter of the race bellowed into his blue megaphone that mumbled the clarity of his voice.

My heart leaped in my chest, spreading anxious blood throughout my body.

We jogged our way back to the start line and were greeted by Renner. He gave us all fist bumps--mine being upside down with the use of our left hands, stemming from the previous year when he helped to create my little pre-race superstition. I sauntered over to the start line, faking confidence, and entered our box, and performed a few last minute series of butt-kicks and A-skip movements.

“Sweats off ladies!” The Starter commanded.

Millions of butterflies swarmed my stomach, attacking like angry hornets fleeing their nest.

I slipped off my black Nike sweatpants, careful not to rip them on my spikes, to reveal a plain black pair of spandex; I gasped at the surprise of the cold air on my bare skin. I unzipped my royal blue warm-up jacket and it made a *swishing* noise as I pulled it off of my body. I then yanked my sweatshirt up and over my head, cautious not to disrupt my hair and bow. The coldness slashed at my skin and injected my muscles with a chilled stiffness. My cheeks stung and my eyes began to water. *You love the cold*, I told myself. *Feed off the cold--thrive because of the cold!*

“Quiet down!” The Starter said, demanding our immediate attention. He rambled on his usual pre-race spiel we had all heard one too many times, and could recite ourselves. “Runners on you mark!” His voice

boomed, echoing in my ears and chasing away my worries. *This is my race*, I mentally encouraged myself.

I looked down at the grass laid before me. Streaks of mud disrupted the blend of green and white grass that created the starting line, as a result of my previous drills I completed briefly before. Sarah stood to my direct left while Dani stood to my direct right. All thoughts ceased from my mind and my left leg mechanically reached back while I gathered myself into a running stance.

It was a long gap of time--if felt like hours before the gun actually went off.

***Bang!***

The sound of the gun was the conductor to the melody of hundreds of pounding feet that every runner loves. It is the song to the soul of a runner. It echoed in my mind and told me to *go!*

The abrupt movement sent a shock through my body and I could identify the fact that the cold had already seeped into my skin, making itself at home in my muscles and bones. My frozen legs carried me up the steep hill that felt like a mountain; my legs and arms begged for warmth while my thighs tried to reason with my brain for a break in my steady pace. I pushed on, determined to give my race everything I had.

Parents, friend, teammates, and coaches all stood in huddles and groups, hollering at whomever they had set out to watch. Splits were read. Places were counted. Motivation was screamed.

“Stride out Emma, you have got to stride out!” A familiar voice yelled. I knew that voice, that piece of motivation, I have heard it hundreds of times since sixth grade. It was my dad—my number one fan—and it sent brief gratitude to my slowly tiring heart. The pack of girls I raced with rounded a corner and made our way across a short patch of fading asphalt. *Crunch-crunch-crunch-crunch-crunch*, several sets of spikes sang together. The wind whistled in my ears, masking the blur of shouts around me, while making my cheeks feel cold and hollow. The image of my nose turning red from the cold shortly shot through my mind, before fading into an almost forgotten nothingness.

The next part of the race flew by in a painful glob of gasping breaths. Minutes ticked onto the time as seconds sprang by, and the distance added up—2.6 miles down.

With a half mile left of the 3.1 mile race, I felt the burning urge to stop tangoing with the massive need to go faster.

I lengthened my stride, my heels hardly grazing my bottom every many steps. The finish line was approaching, but not fast enough.

I begged my body to keep going.

Spectators were lined up creating a wall of people on both sides of the final stretch of the race. They were screaming their last ditch efforts to motivate their runner, and their screams blended together into a bland smoothie of yells.

It felt like a year by the time I reached the plastic blue plates marking the finish.

**Beep!** The plates yelled, reading the chip embedded into my tag, and carrying the data to the commuter system kept from sight. I slowed my pace into a barely walk after entirely crossing the finish line. I bent my torso down and rested my hands on my knees, while my chest fell up and down with my heavy breathing. I was met with the back of Dani's head, although I stood five inches taller than her.

"Dani!" I exclaimed in between gasps of air. She turned on her heel and looked at me. I hobbled over to her, too tired to fully walk, and grabbed her by the shoulders while she embraced me into a hug. Tears filled my eyes and rested on the tops of my smiling cheeks. They were tears of four years of hard work and constant training. Tears of accomplishment and self-pride. They were tears of joy.

Fourteenth place—top fifteen go onto state.

*I made it, completing my goal.*

*I was not done yet.*

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Looking back now, it may be the proudest moment of my high school cross country career. I had had many other great races, big PR's, and strong finishes. I had competed at the State meet the following weekend, and fell short of doing great things. I ran a slower time, and placed poorly among the other runners. The ground was so moist with rain, it was consistently soft and torn up from the previous morning races, and while running on it, my feet would sink into the ground as if it were quicksand.

I wanted the end of the season to be amazing. That was not the case. It was a slow and painful race, mentally and physically; I consider that to be the hardest part of cross country—when you run bad it is more mental than physical, and you only have yourself to blame. I had been hoping to break 20 minutes, and earn my spot on the Top Ten Board, but that was not the case. The race was finished with tears of sadness instead of joy. Tears of the poor run, failed goals, and the fact that I am a high school senior experiencing one of my hardest lasts. It was difficult to end a sport I had competed in for seven years in such a way, and even more difficult to realize and let go of a goal I had been working towards for four years.

Looking back now, I consider Regionals to be my last race—the big bang of my cross country career. Although I made it to State, Regionals is where I ran so hard, leaving my heart stretched out on that 3.1 mile course. Regionals is where I proved I was good at cross country to everybody, especially myself. Regionals is the race that got me the opportunity to compete with the best runners in the state of Michigan. Regionals is the real end of my high school career in cross country. Looking back now, I would not have changed the outcome of State at all, because Regionals was my redemption to the previous years, and will always be the race I accomplished what I didn't think I could. Regionals was my big bang—a great ending to a seven year chapter of my life.