John Smith

Ms. Bria

(P English 111

28 October 2015

**Racing Regrets**

 My mom always told me, “There’s no such thing as a free lunch,” but for some reason I still could never say no when the word “free” was attached. Free donuts? Even though I don’t like them, I’ll take them. Free pens? I never met a bank pen I didn’t like? Free entry to a marathon? In hindsight, I probably should have never said yes to that.

 I was standing on the sidelines of a soccer game when the text came through, offering me a free entry into the Philadelphia Marathon. I thought about it for about a half of a second before I responded.

 “Sure. Why not?” I rapidly typed back, not really thinking and not really watching the soccer game either.

 The game started to pick up momentum, and I was so busy rooting for the home team that I nearly forgot the impossible commitment I just made. 26.2 miles. Gulp. I had never run more than 15 miles at one time, and I certainly hadn’t been training much in the past few weeks. Instead of focusing on my poor muscle tone and my weak endurance, I focused on that finisher medal and bragging rights.

 “Hurry up,” I called to my daughter after the game. “I need to go get some cheap throw-away clothes. Goodwill. Wal-mart. Something.” I rushed her into the car.

 I knew the start line would be cold, but that as soon as I got warmed up, the daytime sun would feel like I was baking in a sauna. If I had some throw away clothes over my race clothes, I could be comfortable at both the start and finish line. Without too much trouble, I was able to find sweatpants and a sweatshirt at the local Wal-Mart. I tossed some jarred sauce and a box of pasta into my cart, planning on “carb-loading” before the race.

 I ate an early dinner, and quickly went to bed – 5 a.m. was going to come quickly, and I needed to be well rested for the race. It didn’t matter how early I went to sleep; I still slept like a little kid on Christmas Eve – tossing and turning with anticipation for the morning. I was wide awake before the alarm even went off, and I quickly got dressed and rushed to my friend Bill’s house. Several of us planned to drive to the start line together, and I didn’t want to be the last one there and add to my reputation as always being late.

 The ride to Philadelphia was silent. I was lost in my own thoughts while looking out the back seat window of Bill’s truck. As I took a puff off my inhaler, and wiped rash guard on my armpits, I nervously looked across the river at the lights of the city.

 “You know, you can stop at the 13-mile mark,” my friend Margo reminded me. “You don’t have to run the whole thing.”

 “Maybe I’ll do that, “ I responded, nervously playing with my drawstring bag. I said those words, but I knew there was no way I was stopping. I wanted that bigger medal and the bigger bragging rights that went along with it.

 It seemed like minutes later that we were through the portapotty line and in our race corral. I was jumping up and down – half to keep warm and half to calm my nerves. *No big deal* – I thought to myself. I would be running with Margo and Bill, and the time would go by quickly.

 And it did go by quickly – for about 14 miles. Those first 14 miles were just as I predicted – No big deal. I tossed clothes off every couple of miles – first the pants, then the gloves, then the hat, and finally the sweatshirt. By mile 5, I was comfortable and having a great time, feeding off the crowd and enjoying the company of my friends.

 When the half-marathon finish line approached, I decided to keep running. I felt like I could keep going for days. I scoffed at all those “weaklings” who veered off that the 13.1-mile mark. I was confident. I was strong. At least I was confident and strong for the next mile or so, until I made the second biggest mistake of my race.

 Right as we were making our way up Kelly Drive, Margo and Bill ran off the course to the portable toilets just after the 14-mile mark. They did it without saying a word. I didn’t want to get separated, so I stood and waited. Big mistake. Huge mistake. When they came back out on the course, my legs wouldn’t start back up again. *Just put one foot in front of the other*, I told myself. That got me through the next 6 miles, over the bridge, down the path, back around, on to Manyunk. I was on autopilot, like a soldier just doing what I was told, surviving.

 Every once in a while, there was a glimmer of hope. I would see a pacing runner with a balloon that read, “4:15”. I would think to myself that a 4:15 marathon time was respectable. A couple miles later, the “4:30” balloon passed me. This wasn’t looking good.

 I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t laugh. I just wanted to finish this race. My friends finally decided to run up to the finish line while I dealt with my pain and my agony. Parts of my body I didn’t even know existed were hurting. I hobbled along, thinking it would be over soon.

 I started running, then walking, then stretching. I was too hurt and exhausted to care how I looked to the crowds cheering us on. All I could think about was whether I would be alive when I crossed the finish line. To add to my pain, runners kept sprinting past yelling, “You’ve got this, Megan.”

 I eventually reached that finish line and forced myself to jog across it, slapping the mayor’s hand as I crossed. The rest was a blur – the heavy medal in my hand, the aluminum blanket around my shoulders, the fake smile as the photographer took my picture. I’m sure the smile would eventually be real, but at that moment all I felt was pain.

 “How far away is the car?” I asked Margo’s husband, who was in charge of driving us home.

 “It’s just up two blocks,” he pointed north. “I got a spot on the fourth floor of that parking garage.”

I looked up the street to the parking structure. There was no way I was going to make it there, let alone up four flights of stairs – not after running a marathon with no training. I winced.

“Why don’t you wait here, and we’ll pick you up,” he said.

That was the best thing I heard all day.