

ODE TO EIGHTEEN

I sit transfixed, eyes locked and set, jaw clenched, legs crossed, arms folded on my lap, each limb heavy as a steel anvil. My eyes want to fix on the same object even as I blink. My breathing is slow and deep, long inhales followed by quick exhales, as if I am entering deep REM sleep.

I have finished eighteen miles, on the hills, and made it to church by ten.

It is the first eighteen of the season, a struggle, as eighteen miles usually is. The first hour is on the highest hills in the state, long before daylight, dodging the occasional fisherman pulling his bass rig to the lake. The second hour is perfect, flat, magnificent sunrise, cool temperatures, and a cloudless morning sky. The third hour grows progressively difficult, aches and pains sprout like jonquils on a spring day. Finally, it is over and there remains less than an hour to shower, eat and drive to church. I am able to keep the façade of normalcy—"Sure I'm O.K., Honey"—until I ease down to the church pew. I quickly become paralyzed.

I sit, hoping that I am portraying the perfect picture of reverence, my mind working at sub-six pace, my body frozen. I am pleased to hear the announcement for the prayer and I quickly and thankfully close my eyes. My head is already bowed. I am jolted upright by a wifely elbow and I frown at her for having the nerve to think I was sleeping. I regain consciousness less than a minute after the prayer is finished, three globules of saliva glistening on the left lapel of my sport coat. I do not understand my wife's quiet comment but faintly make out the word "drooling" and react indignantly with a facial contortion.

I hear the dreaded words, "rise for the hymn" and know it is gut check time. Using the same source of adrenalin frightened women use to pick up automobiles, I give it a determined try. I find that by hooking my elbow around the pew in front, then using all the strength in my other arm I am able to push myself to a standing position. I feel pretty good, erect and proud of my accomplishment, until I realize I am not singing, but rather staring at the long word at the end of the second line, "Ga-le-lee." I find the wherewithal to join in. Perhaps a latent drop of GU entered my bloodstream. I sing in a firm and strong voice, careful not to miss a single word or note on the third verse. Unfortunately the remainder of the congregation is finishing the fourth.

Plopping back down on the pew, I re-enter my slight coma. The sermon is beginning and I strain to hear the three points the preacher is to discuss. I hear him say the points all begin with the letter "s". I think I understand all three words: siesta, silence and sleep, although I could not be sure. After that, I kind of lose track. I did, however, determine that one can positively sleep with eyes wide open.

Part way through the sermon the carbohydrate depletion resurfaces. I visualize a Coke Classic—not the Diet Coke I always drink, but a full flavor, full bodied Coca-Cola containing sugar! I can hear the can pop open and, as I pour the caramel-colored liquid over the ice cubes, feel the fizz jump onto my face as I sniff the bouquet of the delicious, dark drink. From the elusive Coke I move to the half-eaten bag of chocolate morsels stashed in the bright yellow bag at home on the pantry shelf. I can smell the chocolate and feel the surge of energy that comes from that wonderful combination of sugar and caffeine. The visions end but the carbohydrate craving continues.

An idea surfaces from deep within my brain. Using superhuman strength I lift my right hand and get it into my front trouser pocket. Quickly my fingers locate what I am praying is there. A starlight mint! I quietly remove it and start the unwrapping process. The cellophane is brittle and noisy. Crinkles echo in the silence of the sanctuary. I feel my wife's disapproving

glance. I ignore her and work silently but feverishly. The small boy on the pew in front hears the noise and his head pops over the back of the pew like a tortoise's head extending out of its shell. His eyes focus immediately on the mint, then our eyes meet. No way, kid! You ain't getting this!

The energy in the mint carries me to the end of the service and the next big challenge, which is getting out of the church. Using my newly developed method of rising, I slowly attain a standing position and plant my feet firmly. I fortify my thinking to make sure it knows my legs will soon have to move and shuffle out into the aisle.

I see her coming, prancing across the sanctuary like a show pony, young, tanned, fit and blond. She is a new runner, home from college for the weekend and full of enthusiasm for running. She is unaware of the horrible temporary conditions it can cause, and hero-struck at people, regardless of age, who can run for long distances. I know she is heading for me. My response is immediate and spontaneous—primal—my shoulders go back, head rises, stomach pulls in. I look away nonchalantly, cool, calm, aloof and very athletic.

"Hi", she says.

"Well, hello. I didn't see you."

"I ran five miles yesterday!"

"You did? Fantastic! That's great—that your P.R.?"

"Pardon?"

"Is that the first time you've run that far?"

"Yeah, I ran with Sean. We had a great time!"

Sean is the twerp with the spiked hair and the earring in his eyebrow. How did that dork make five miles?

"How about you—did you have a good week?" she continued.

"Yeah, got in a few miles. I ran this morning, before church."

"Yeah? How far?"

"I got in eighteen."

"*Eighteen miles?* How can you possibly run eighteen miles?"

"Aw, you know, it was a great morning for running....you know, it just takes one step at a time." I flash a smile.

"WOW, I can't see how *anybody* can run that far. I'm amazed...and impressed! Sean! Hey Sean. Come here. I want to tell you something!"

I walk away before Sean arrives, ignoring the girl and without speaking to the preacher. I do not want, among my other transgressions of the morning, to lie about how good his sermon was!

My prayer is that I am out of her field of vision before I have to descend the front steps.

Kenneth Williams
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