The van was quiet. Or maybe it wasn’t, maybe my teammates were chattering about the race, and I just couldn’t hear very well because I had my airpods in. I didn’t care much either way. I didn’t have anything to say. I turned up the volume of my Spotify playlist and dug my hands into the fabric of the car seat, under my smooth, freshly-shaven thighs.

I always shave my legs before races. I also always lay out my clothes, fill up my water bottle, and write a bit in a journal the night before. I had done all of this in the hotel in Clackamas, Oregon, about 12 hours ago. It was 9 AM now, and we were driving to the course in a twelve-passenger van.

I’d never been to Oregon before. I had (correctly) pictured pine forests, clean air, and people with an outdoorsy laid-backness before arriving. I imagined the people to be a little edgier than students at my college in Northfield, Minnesota, where they prided themselves on “Minnesota Nice”-ness. And, of course, I knew about Steve Prefontaine, the most legendary distance runner of all time, who had attended the University of Oregon. Our race was in Clackamas, but we landed in Eugene for the sole purpose of checking out Prefontaine’s hometown.

I was sitting in the back of the van, looking out the window. I saw pine trees and farmland. There were cows, too, and they watched us drive by with their dewy, brown eyes. Why do cows always look so sad? I unfocused my eyes and the trees blurred together into a green blob. Then, I keeled over in my seat, coughing violently into my elbow. Alice, my teammate, laughed and said, Jesus, Phoebe, you good? I smiled, eyes watery, and flashed her a sheepish thumbs-up.

For the past two weeks, I had been nursing the worst cold I’d ever had, pouring reddish-purple cough syrup into a plastic cup and knocking it back like I was a Euphoria character at a house party. According to Google, the intensity of my cold could, ironically, be attributed to the past year of intensive mask-wearing. Maybe my immune system was out of practice after being protected by a mask for so long. After a couple colds, I read, and my immune system would be back to normal.
Helen, one row in front of me, pointed straight ahead. I leaned over to look, and saw a mountain. It was covered in snow, and curved in a perfect round edge at the top, like a ping pong ball. Mount Hood, she said. The van turned right, and I got a better view of it out of my window. I tried to take a picture but was foiled by the glare on the window. It’s funny how much people like looking at big things, said Marte, who was sitting to my right. I agreed. Sometimes it’s nice to feel small, I said.

That morning, I had called my parents, the way I usually did before races. I missed my family at college, not really in a homesick way – I loved college – but as people. I missed that level of closeness, especially when I was nervous about competing. I needed to feel like myself before races. I called it feeling “grounded.” But that morning, I did not talk about my upcoming race, or running, at all. Standing on FaceTime in a hallway on the second floor of a hotel in Clackamas, Oregon, I learned that my grandfather had died. My dad’s dad. We didn’t want to tell you until after your race, my parents had said, but you called. Dad’s eyes were puffy and red, and his voice kept breaking.

I was still looking at Mount Hood out of the van window. It was so foreign to me, this mountain. Nothing looks like that at home in New York. Nothing looms that large, that white. I thought of my parents this morning, three thousand miles away, and got a lump in my throat. I turned up the volume of my airpods again until it couldn’t go anymore, until it felt like I was drowning in the sound.

The race began at 11:00 AM. At the crack of the gun, three hundred runners weaved through green trees on a trail that ran parallel to a brook. We stumbled over the finish line like baby deer, legs wobbly, and if you were me, wheezing like a smoker. Breathing so hard during the race had shoved the phlegm down, but now it was forcing itself back up, and I couldn’t get a word out without sounding like I was coughing up my internal organs. Not my best effort, but I finished. I jogged over to my bag and took a shot of Theraflu. I checked my phone and saw 60 messages from multiple family group chats. I shut it off, and went back to my teammates, who were holding a First Place Team Trophy and lining up in picture-taking formation.

Our coaches said that the rest of the trip would be The Fun Part. We were headed to Newport, a beach town three hours from Clackamas. Everyone was excited about swimming in the ocean. I put my
I put on my airpods and wrote a comic in my sketchbook on the way there about my grandfather. I texted the comic to my parents and sister, who thought it was nice. I posted it on my comic Instagram account. It got 400 likes and a bunch of comments: I’m sorry for your loss. He sounded like an amazing man. This is a wonderful tribute. Sending love to you and your family. At some point, alternating between refreshing the post and looking out the window, I fell asleep.

The van door made a shuddering sound as it opened, and I woke up, dazed. You women should go straight to the ocean, said our coach, smiling. Go check it out, it’s right there. We clamored out of the van, felt the wind on our faces. It was not warm out. The beach entrance was straight ahead, a steep stairway leading us down to the shore. A couple of my teammates started running, laughing as they ran down the stairs. I stepped onto the sand, took off my shoes. The beach curved like a sickle, and miles away, at both ends there were small mountains. All along the beach, green cliffs sloped into the sand. The sky was huge and blue. ‘Grand’ is the word for this, I thought. In sports bras and spandex, we ran into the water, and I touched the Pacific Ocean for the first time. The water was beautifully, shockingly cold. It was almost enough. I almost forgot about my grandfather, for a minute.

The team woke up early the next morning for a long run on the beach at low tide. It was four miles all the way to the end of the sickle, up the mountain. At the end of the fourth mile, we reached a lighthouse that sat on top of grey rocks, overlooking the beach we had just run on. Swimming at this end of the beach would be a fatal mistake. The waves slammed into the rocks, the water frothy and bubbling. Clara noticed a black sand beach, and we jogged down. I could see cormorants bobbing on the waves, oblivious, it seemed, to the possibility that they could drown. Such small birds, I thought. How do they survive these waters every day? The wind blew all of our ponytails in the same direction. We threw rocks in the water, listened to the pounding waves. Clara checked her watch. All right, let’s head back, she said to all of us.

I knew I was running a little too fast on the four miles back to the hotel, but I couldn’t help it. I wanted to drink the air. The beach lay before me, wide, never-ending. It is so big, I thought, and we are so small.