Racing Home

By Chris Clemente

1. My dad paced around my bike. He abruptly stopped in front of me.
2. “Are you ready to go?” he asked. Instead of responding, I gave him a lame thumbs-up and lied. I don’t think I had ever been ready for this race.
3. I felt like I was in an exotic fish tank. People around me were dressed in bright neon colored jerseys and matching tights. They all rode stationary bicycle trainers. Their legs moved up then down, up then down. It was cold, more so than I expected. I slipped on a winter hat even though it was in the middle of the summer. My cleats clicked, tightening around my feet. They were wet with dew. I nearly slipped as I hopped on my bike. A slight breeze flapped my plastic race number against the bike’s front tire. I turned up Dave Matthews Band on my iPod. I began to pedal like I had practiced so many times before. One foot up, one foot down I thought. It was the only rhythm I could get into. I stared up at the mountain and took a deep breath. When will this race be over? I asked.
4. Six months ago Shakira’s song “Hips Don’t Lie” blasted from my cell phone. I absentmindedly searched the floor with a limp hand. I brushed over a plate with old pizza crusts in it before finding the phone.
5. “Hello,” I mumbled in my just-woke-up-from-a-deep-sleep rasp.
6. “Hey Chris! We’re all signed up,” my dad chattered.
7. “What time is it?”
8. “Five after six. I didn’t think we’d get into the race, but I logged in extra early to make sure. They only allow 300 entries, and just think, you’ll be one of that small number of lucky people to make the most famous hill climb in the northeast.”
9. “Dad, what are you talking about?”
10. “I signed you up for the Mt. Washington Bicycle Hill Climb. You know that annual bike race up the Mt. Washington Auto Road? It’s only seven miles long with an average grade of twelve percent. Of course, it gets a little steeper at the top of the hill with the twenty-two percent grade. Oh, wow, it says on the website that winds have been so severe near the summit that they have actually blown riders off the bikes,” he rambled on.
11. “Cool, Dad.”
12. “Yep, it’s only three hundred dollars.” I heard an exasperated “WHAT?” in the background from my mother. “We only have 180 days to get ready for it. I gotta get ready for work. I’ll talk to you later.”
13. “Bye,” I slipped in, as the phone fell from my ear. My eyes shut to go back to sleep. I guess I wasn’t concerned about a bicycle race up a 6,288 foot summit that holds the record for the worst weather ever recorded on earth. Six months is a long way away, I thought.
14. My training felt like I was in a montage of a Rocky movie. I woke up every morning at 5:45. I gulped down a quick glass of OJ and hit the road for a twenty mile bike ride. I know now that riding a bike through the hilly roads of New Hampshire is like riding a roller coaster without having fun. It was a constant struggle against gravity. Luckily these hills were maybe 1/100 of the steepness and size of Mt. Washington. I have to admit though, I did enjoy the wind whipping in my face as I tucked down a hill, and the sensation that I got when I “raced” a car from a traffic light. I went pedal to the metal to see how long I could keep up with them.
15. The most important part of my training was the “strategy” sessions with my dad. He would sit me down in the living room and go over every inch of the auto road of Mt. Washington. I listened and wolfed down leftovers from dinner. He lectured about how much water I should be drinking in the first two miles. He mentioned how a good cadence (revolution of the pedals) helps get you into a rhythm. He advised me what to do if someone were to nudge me on a curve (“Nudge ‘em back!”). And most importantly, he explained how I could finish the race with a sprint. His eyes always lit up when he talked about his own experience in the race. He was a short guy, but built with a large upper chest that made him the “perfect” ratio for climbing on a bicycle. His hair was short and curly. But back in the day, he sported a large afro and a moustache. The look made my grandfather mistake him for a Puerto Rican (He’s a 100% Italian). He talked with his hands in constant motion. He always stood up when he got to the finish of the race and the end of the story.
16. I felt like he hurled a rock of pressure on me every day. He remembered exact details about his race. Like how it took him forty-two minutes and thirty-seven seconds from start to finish. Of course, he blamed this time on the poor bike technology available in the 1970s. He was confident that I would shatter his record. When he signed me up, I was excited to race just to say I did it. But with every pep talk, I felt like I had to be the first one up the mountain.
17. I was stranded in the backseat of our Chevy Blazer on the only road to the base of Mount Washington. I felt like the car was a skateboard driving in the middle of a half pipe built of mountains. My head was pressed to the side window. It was difficult to see out of it so early in the morning. The usual lush trees and brush that seem to be glued on to every visible surface on the side of the range were a dark, shadowy gray. The car barreled onwards with my bike strapped firmly to the roof.
18. “Frank, are you sure he shouldn’t be wearing a parachute?” my mother asked in a serious tone. She was concerned that the winds would sweep me straight off the bike. I would’ve laughed but my dad told me to save energy. I chomped on a bagel and slurped on some coffee. My dad reminded me that I should probably wear a light windbreaker over my jersey to battle the winds. We approached the entrance to the bottom of the auto road of the mountain. It was marked by a lonely hut that sells touristy sweatshirts and bumper stickers. They said “I Heart Mt. Washington” and “This Car Has Climbed Mt. Washington.” We turned into a grass field for parking. I could tell he was nervous. He wasn’t talking much, and he kept asking me if I wanted more coffee.
19. I lined up at the starting line. My dad tapped me on my helmet. Oh great, another strategy before the ride I thought. He motioned for me to unplug my headphones.
20. “I love you, Chris,” was all he said. He walked away to drive the car up the mountain to pick me up from the top when I was finished. I was stuck in the middle of many riders, just waiting for the gun. I watched all the cars drive up the mountain to wait at the top like a funeral procession. I could see my mom from the side of the road. She didn’t make me feel comfortable. Her eyes were shifting from side to side. I could only guess that she was imagining a large tornado blowing me off the road like Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz. Some water beaded up on my sunglasses. I wiped them on my white and blue jersey. I looked down and noticed that my right foot was twitching a bit. The bike moved side to side. I peered up the road and tried to visualize the course in my mind. I couldn’t get past the first hairpin turn. I felt my ears prickle with warmth. Any second now. Closing my eyes, I just waited for the sound of the gun to pierce the air.
21. Instead of a gun shot, I heard a large megaphone. I turned to my left to see a man stand on a table. I loosened my headphones.
22. “Excuse me, racers, my name is Billy Fontaine, and I’m the director of the race this morning,” the man on the table said. “I hate to inform you that today’s race has been cancelled due to inclement weather at the top of the mountain. Please return your racing tags to the baskets, and I apologize again for the inconvenience.” I kicked the ground hard with my cleats, and clenched my jaw. The training, the preparation, the pressure, the hype. The race had been held for over thirty years. This was the first year that they had ever cancelled it. My mother looked relieved. It was painful waiting for Dad to come down from the top with the car. At last, I saw him descending down the road. He parked in the same place where we were before. He walked over to us in the tent. His pace was slow. He avoided making eye contact with me. His legs zig-zagged side to side like a zombie. Turning around, he looked at the mountain. Then, he turned his gaze toward the ground. I wanted to bolt away with my bike. I wanted to race the car all the way home.

Analytical Essay

1. How does the author create voice through the use of the following techniques:
2. Informal language
3. Diction (author’s word choice)
4. Allusion

Selected Response

1. What two literary devices are used in the statement “zig-zagged side to side like a zombie” (par. 22)
   1. Alliteration and simile
   2. Assonance and metaphor
   3. Cacophony and simile
   4. Euphony and metaphor
2. What is the point of view?
   1. First person
   2. Second person
   3. Third person limited
   4. Third person omniscient
3. What is the purpose of the dashes in, “Hello,” I mumbled in my just-woke-up-from-a-deep-sleep rasp.
   1. Create setting
   2. Develop emphasis
   3. Establish characterization
   4. Set the tone
4. In the context of paragraph 14, what is the meaning of the word montage?
   1. collections
   2. combination
   3. Excerpts
   4. Mixture