

## Lake Placid Ironman

July 28, 2013

Swim: 1:27:53      Split 1: 43:00   Split 2: 44:53

Bike: 6:32:33      30 mi: 1:26      56 mi: 1:44  
86 mi: 1:31      112 mi: 1:50

Run: 5:23:11



“Dear Dad,” the aid station volunteer began to read to me, “Just imagine that I am riding beside you on Firework Heart Flower and together we will finish the race this time. I wish I was riding the race with you Dad”.

I sucked in a ragged breath.

Firework Heart Flower is the name that Sylvie, my youngest, had given to her new bicycle, and she would join me on “training rides” in Brooklyn, taking me to the end of the block and back. I even set her up with a little bento box on the frame so she could store jelly beans.

“There’s another one, do you want me to read it too?”

I could only nod.

“Dear Dad, just keep thinking that you can do it. From Leonie. That’s what I do when I am scared but trying to jump into water. I love you Dad.”

She turned the card to show the picture inside, me on a very detailed bicycle, riding toward a finish line.

My throat constricted around itself, my face contorted, and I found myself on the verge of tears.

Exhausted, dehydrated, with legs that had been cramping to the point of agonizing debilitation, I was clutching handfuls of ice to the back of my neck to try to combat the heat stroke that dropped me to the pavement twenty yards prior.

It was roughly mile 12 of the marathon, and I stood unsteadily outside the Special Needs tent, with two volunteers and the medic who first pulled me to my feet staring at me in concern. Unspoken but clear: all of the people in this sad little circle, myself included, strongly suspected my day was over.

There was one last piece of paper in bottom of my Special Needs bag, folded into quarters like a secret. I dropped the ice I was carrying to open it.

“What’s that?” asked the medic.

I pulled in a deep breath. “It’s my number from the New York City Ironman. I – I didn’t finish that race. I collapsed at the Special Needs tent during the marathon and couldn’t go on.”

We all looked at each other, absorbing the painful irony of my present situation.

I stared at the bib number. My legs were cramping impossibly and had been for miles, forcing me to a halt every ten or twenty yards as some new muscle shot itself rigid, and my gait had been reduced to a series of unbalanced contortions to keep me shuffling forward.

There were 14 hilly miles ahead of me and I was completely depleted. I had already collapsed twice.

There was no way, physiologically, that I could finish this race in this condition. I wondered if I was learning that for whatever reason, I simply was not cut from the right cloth to be an Ironman.

I took the letters from the aid worker. I folded them into quarters. I took the New York City bib number and stared at it. I folded it back into quarters and clutched the papers in my fists.

“God DAMN it!” I cried out, to no one and everyone.

I pushed the medic’s hand off my shoulder, turned my back on the aid station workers, and shuffled off down Mirror Lake Drive.

An already long day was, as it turns out, just beginning.

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Val, the girls and I arrived in Lake Placid on Thursday morning prior to the race and set up camp at Wilmington Notch, a small state park roughly ten miles outside of the center and town and right on the bike course for the race.

We had been up for an informal training weekend a few weeks earlier to join the Withrows, so the campground was familiar, and as we busied ourselves staking out the tent I let myself enjoy a strong sense of optimism about this particular race.

I was as fit as I had ever been in my life, which is tough to say, truthfully, when there are 43 years on the clock. I was running faster than I ever had, and my biking, long the weak link in the Robbie triathlon chain, had made some sort of evolutionary leap forward.

This had as much to do with equipment as it had to do with fitness. Withrow, who was possibly as upset as I was about my failure to finish at New York, called me one morning at work to announce he had found my new bike even if I didn’t know it yet.

He was determined to upgrade my kit, and he proposed to retire the Silver Missile (my now 12 year old Specialized Allez road bike) for a marvelous Cannondale Slice that he found in an overlooked corner of eBay. If it’s good enough for Chrissie Wellington, he observed, it’s probably good enough for Robbie.

It arrived in the spring, and it was a fantastically balanced machine that had me moving as fast on two wheels as I could imagine.

There was one issue: Sylvie, who we have long nicknamed Silver, was beside herself with grief – in her mind, the Silver Missile was named for her and she was literally in tears when I announced the replacement to the family.

We came to terms, and agreed that I would always keep the Silver Missile so she could ride it when she was a big girl and further, she would get to name my new bike.

And so it came to pass that my lovely Cannondale was christened CandyCane Snowflake, as its color scheme reminded Sylvie immediately of the candycanes that littered our Christmas tree (until she located and devoured them).

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Importantly, I had also solved my nutrition issue in a meaningful way.

When I start to get hot (and bearing in mind that I am Canadian, and therefore uniquely unprepared to handle heat) my body all but ceases to absorb fluids. I can take salt pills, I can drink all kinds of electrolyte-laden fluids, natural (coco water) or synthetic, but for some reason my body will not hydrate itself past a certain point.

I learned this at the AmZof in 2012 (cramps, terrible cramps, last place finish, men 40-45) and conclusively demonstrated it at the New York City Ironman (collapse, medical tent, tears).

Again, Withrow set about solving my problems for me and dropped a two-pound bag of Infinit powder on my desk one day, admonishing me to at least try it. I don't know what the difference is between Infinit and other engineered nutrition / hydration drinks, but over six full months of training and racing with it my issues with hydration (and therefore, cramping and bonking) had all but disappeared.

I was doing centuries in hot weather without issue, running 15 – 20 miles midday in Brooklyn during the July heat wave, or scrambling around on trails after Z-man for hours at a time and while my legs were certainly sore, there was no sign of the issues I had experienced with muscle cramps or failure to absorb fluids the prior season.

There were, therefore, a lot of reasons for me to feel pretty good about the race.

So I did.

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The other thing I had in my corner was my absolute determination to finish.

Now, nobody starts one of these things with any other outcome in mind, but I was in a place where a bus could have hit me and I would have kept going.

While I politely hedged my expectations in public, I would not let myself imagine any other outcome as it was the only result that I felt could possibly diminish the pain of having to leave the course in New York.

Despite the passage of a year's time, the wound suffered by my failure to finish at the NYC Ironman was as raw as ever. It was a pain that would creep up on me, too, and surprise me – I would find myself at work, or on a long run, or even walking in the park with a cup of coffee, and I would be suddenly stung by the unannounced memory of having to turn my back on the George Washington Bridge and leave the course.

I intended to replace the memory of New York wholesale with a new memory – the memory of crossing the line at Placid, arms outstretched.

Finishing.

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I also had a few other things on my mind.

For example, I walked into work two weeks before the race and quit my job.

I have quit plenty of jobs over the last twenty years, but to date I have been clever enough to have another job to look forward to as I was leaving the old one.

Except for this time.

This time, despite the pleasure of a wife, two kids, a mortgage, and savings ravaged by the past four years of global economic misfortune, I quit my job precisely because I just didn't want to do it any more.

That's an essay in itself (certainly, one is forthcoming) but the simple truth is that work just wasn't making me happy or keeping me engaged in a way that something that keeps a guy away from his family or any of his other interests for ten hours a day should.

As it turns out, while it may not be exactly the stuff of the Protestant work ethic, in return for my time, my relationships and my abilities, in addition to compensation, I want to be happy. I want to feel optimistic.

I wasn't either of those things, and it led to the sense that I was letting time slip through my fingers – my own time.

And I simply couldn't stand the thought of it any more.

It's too valuable to squander.

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Years ago I was working out regularly at a kung fu gym (there was nothing, at that time, that I would not have done to try to convince Val to marry me, and that included following her to the kung fu gym she went to).

Sparring at the end of a class one night, I was stuck fighting a shambling giant, Serge, a carpenter from Williamsburg at a time when you had to actually be tough as nails to live in Williamsburg and the only guys who had flannel shirts and wore beards were actual lumberjacks.

Relative to myself, Serge was much, much larger, much stronger, and a much more experienced fighter. At one point he ducked a lazy punch and simply picked me up over his head, spun me, and threw me on the mat, WWF style. He pounced on me like a tiger.

It happened fast, and I had no idea what to do. Stunned, I frantically stared up at the Master, who was standing in a neutral corner of the ring watching me about to get my arms torn out of their sockets. While Serge flopped onto my back to keep me, I stared at the Master and waited for some kind of instruction, hint, or suggestion.

The Master looked at me for a second, absorbed my predicament, arched his eyebrow and simply said, "Do something".

Sometimes, when it's all going sideways, we get stunned into inaction when we actually need to do something. Anything. There's no special trick, no secret move, nothing other than the basic need to overcome inertia if only to change and develop the situation you find yourself in.

It is basic advice and good advice but surprisingly hard to follow.

So, ten years later when I came home from a long training session at the beginning of the summer, the kind that afforded me a lot of time with myself, I had a conversation with Val.

I wasn't happy at work, and she knew it, and even the girls could sense my disquiet. It was seeping into our life as a family.

So we decided to do something about it, the most obvious and straightforward thing to do: if work is leaving you empty, you leave work.

The rest, of course (like having no income, two kids and a mortgage) is just details.

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I trained hard over the past year and raced harder, and it showed in the results.

I placed third in my age group at the American Zofingen duathlon in May, a stunning outcome, and despite the insane heat, crushed my expectations at the NYC Triathlon just two weeks prior to the Ironman, finishing that effort with one of my fastest 10k times ever.

Further, I had been able to ride the Placid bike course several times, so was familiar with and ready for it. While I found it difficult to get a real rhythm going on the course, I knew it reasonably well and had developed a strategy that I suspected would shave an hour or more off my time on the bike at NYC while leaving me fresher for the run.

And so I was looking forward to Placid, for both confirmation and vindication, and while on the surface I tried to remain light-hearted about it, the burden of my personal expectations was enormous and grew daily.

Then suddenly, here we were, walking through town to check in and absorbing the palpable energy that the event was generating.

The girls also showed their familiarity with the town, as both of them loudly observed that the ice cream shop they preferred was, in fact, at the end of town opposite check in.

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Early on, little things went right.

At check-in, I bumped right in to Canadian Steve, who the Withrows had introduced me to over the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend along with his wife, Canadian Brenda. They were a lovely couple, and we enjoyed several meals with them that weekend (one night Steve demonstrated, to the delight of the assembled crowd, how to cook a pizza over the open flame of a campfire).

The one logistical problem I faced, thanks to my location at the campsite, was how to actually get into town to start the race and still leave Val and the girls with transportation, as we only had our one truck with us.

Steve, working the race as a volunteer, immediately committed to pick me up race morning and have me at transition by 5:15.

Problem solved.

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Race morning was a blur – in my pre-race, pre-dawn ritual, I took off my wedding band and slipped it on Val's finger, and snuck out of the tent in the chill to make coffee and wolf down a couple almond butter and dark chocolate sandwiches (try it sometime). I felt relatively tranquil.

Steve and Brenda pulled into the campsite at the appointed time on the button, and we were off. Brenda told me where to keep an eye out for them on the course, Steve threw me into a mild panic about the possibility that my tires had burst overnight, and then we were parking the car and I made my way to transition.

The sun rose to reveal a clear sky overhead with a few clouds making their way in over the horizon – perfect weather.

I was racked next to EZ, and bumped in to him as we both inspected our bikes.

He was pretty calm himself, which redoubled my positive mood as I slid bottles of Infinit into CandyCane Snowflake's multiple cages.

We wished each other well and parted ways, and I was off to Mirror Lake.

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A long wait in line at the swim start to use the bathroom gave me a chance to be social and say hello to both Withrows, and see Gareth getting himself mentally ready for the swim (swimming being something he couldn't actually do six months ago).

I zipped John into his new wetsuit several times, as the quick release zipper was giving us a little difficulty. His body didn't make it all that easy, either – while JW was as skinny as I've ever seen him, his wrestler's lats still spread out like a set of heron wings, complicating the effort required to get him into the damn thing.

I got set up, paddled about in the water, watched the pro start, and then waited, quite calmly, to get into the water to start the swim.

With the staged start I was able to simply walk into the water and get going. Placid is a beautiful swim, the water clear and cool, and after running over a few people I fell in with a pack of folks going almost exactly my preferred speed and so was able to spend virtually the entire swim simply relaxing and keeping in touch with the ankles in front of me.

I was out of the water in under an hour and a half, which is exactly on target for me – while I likely could knock 10-15 minutes off my swim time, the simple truth is that the sacrifice required to do that is not one I've been willing to make given the existing amount of time training already takes from my family.

Once stripped of my wetsuit I padded, on the balls of my feet, into transition to begin the bike leg.

My transition went about as smoothly as one ever has thanks to the fluke of getting a charity slot: my bib was 182 which had me racked with the pros and left my gear bag dangling at the entrance to the transition tent.

I pulled on my bike jersey and cool sleeves to protect me from the sun, put a nicely padded set of bike shorts on over my tri shorts to keep my man parts as comfortable as possible given the circumstances, tapped my watch to let it know the bike leg was starting, and set out.

I'd never felt better about throwing my leg over my bike in a race.

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CandyCane Snowflake is fast.

During my training rides, with a Zipp 808 up front and a disc on the rear, she sufficiently terrified me on the downhill into Keene to have me ride that section sitting straight up and dragging my brakes wherever possible simply to avoid breaking the sound barrier.

However, race day was different. With the ample space provided by having two full lanes shut down to traffic and reserved for us, I felt there would be enough space to dramatically increase my margin for error and pull out the stops.

I paced myself appropriately on the uphill out of town, sipping my Infinit and allowing dozens of people to pass me – as a new disciple of riding with power, I had to force myself not to yell at people who were standing on their pedals and cranking out huge watts to get themselves up these hills this early in the race.

*I'll be seeing you again, my friends. Soon.*

I carried a ton of speed through the downhill rollers along the reservoir, and quicker than I expected, I was upon the downhill to Keene for the first time. What the hell, I figured, and stayed put in the aero bars.

CandyCane Snowflake gathered momentum like a spirit unleashed, and I was soon moving faster on her than I ever had.

Halfway down the descent, I was flying – a high fortysomething miles per hour, keeping my arms and shoulders relaxed on the bars, letting the bike do what it wanted to do – go straight.

I made sure to afford slower cyclists (which, at this point, was just about everyone else) incredibly wide berths.

I came up quickly on a knot of cyclists who were looking tentative – they had bunched up on each other and were in the process of spreading themselves out across the course, choking one lane fully and beginning to migrate into the second lane.

They were taking up a ton of space, collectively, and I wanted to clear them as quickly as possible as the potential for a bad outcome was quite clearly scrawled across this scene.

I drifted wide.

Two of the cyclists had left a large space between them, but it seemed like a terrible idea to thread this particular needle.

So I drifted wider again, pretty much kissing the yellow line at the boundary of the second lane, and in doing so hit a bump I hadn't seen - big enough that it jarred me uncomfortably, but more unnervingly, knocked loose the two bottles of Infinit stored on my seat cage.

I could hear them dance away behind me, thumping into the pavement on initial impact and then skipping and tapping their way down the road into oncoming traffic, or into the ditch, or somewhere, but that somewhere was anywhere but where I needed them – back in my bottle cage.

So, I now had exactly half of my planned nutrition for the bike leg – and it happens to be the nutrition that has been the only solution, to date, for properly hydrating me during endurance events.

Like, for example, an Ironman.

An ugly, cancerous dread perched itself deep in the pit of my stomach, and leered out at me from the gloom: you're barely 12 miles into your race, Robbie, and here is a curveball.

One hell of a curveball.

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I'm getting close to the end of the first bike loop and laboring up the vicious little hill right outside the campground.

I expect to see Val and the girls, but am not prepared for the enthusiastic crowd that has gathered. A group of shirtless young men, one in a gorilla mask, are chanting "Shut Up Legs!" and a second group are howling for cyclists to do wheelies.

An absurd request, and one that speaks to me, so I do.

They go wild.

The guy beside me doesn't do a wheelie, however, and they heckle him.

"Hey dude – even Andy Potts did a wheelie!"

Then I see Val and the girls, and wave, and they scream and yell and wave their signs and I tell them I feel good (the only time this will be actually true) and they tell me I look good (again, the first and last truth for this observation) and then I am off.

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Bike special needs is upon me.

Like an ass, I did not pack any extra Infnit because, honestly, why would I need any extra when all the fluid I need is on my bike?

I did, however, pack almond butter and dark chocolate sandwiches, made on raisin walnut bread, and I devour them on the move and I have never, ever, tasted a better sandwich in my life.

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The second bike loop sees me making concessions I did not want to have to make, but thanks to my Infnit deficiency, I am now drinking bottles of Perform and eating the bananas and Gu Chomps and whatever else they pass out in the aid stations, despite the knowledge that all this eating and drinking is likely a waste of time.

But it is the only option I have, so I take it, and I suppose I will find out if this lack of Infnit is really as big an issue as I suspect it might be.

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I come into transition from the second loop and my legs feel great. Tired, of course, and a little wobbly but I am done the bike loop in over an hour faster than I did New York despite a second lap extended pit stop to deal with a leaky aero bottle and, candidly, a leaky rider.

I am chomping at the bit to get running.

I'm off the bike and stripping out of my bike jersey and shorts, and pull my tri top on in its place. That it is dry and clean is a small comfort.

My shoes lace up in a hurry and I bounce out of the tent, my feet embracing the pliant, almost fluffy soles of my Asics after six and a half hard hours in my bike shoes.

This is it: 26.2 miles between me and the finish line, and I am in very good shape right now and further, based on my training, I feel that there is every likelihood that if I can keep focused on the run I have a 12 hour finish in me.

I also take care to remind myself to exercise extreme caution here – knocking out an early string of 7 minute miles is going to end my day in a hurry.

Out of transition and into the town and the energy is an intoxicant – throngs line the streets, screaming and yelling and chanting and rewarding any acknowledgement with redoubled cheering.

I run a 7:45 first mile, virtually unaware of how fast I am moving until my watch chirps my pace at me, and force myself to slow down substantially.

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Still nervous about how the lack of Infnit may have affected my hydration, I stop at every single aid station. I drink a cup of perform. I drink a cup of water. I dump a cup of water on my head and another on my neck. I drink a cup of Coke. I have salt pills and take one at the first aid station and plan to take one every four miles thereafter.

As I descend into the rolling River Road out and back, I feel strong and I have settled into comfortable yet reasonably fast pace – 8:45 miles including stops at the aid stations.

I am passing a lot of people and see a lot of people walking on the return, and I am determined not to be one of those people.

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As I head toward the first turn-around along River Road, maybe six miles in, I feel an odd twinge along the interior of my right leg.

I try not to panic but I know this feeling, and it has never, once, foretold anything good.

This twinge, this assassin's whisper from my body to my mind, is a thinly veiled threat that presages the tempest on the come – the subtle shift in wind, the sudden silence of songbirds before everything is plunged into a dark grey catastrophe.

*Oh please no...* I whisper to myself, each word falling out of my mouth in time with my footfall, but I know it is coming. And it is not even a quarter of a way through the run.

I steel myself.

I slightly alter my stride, shifting my hips forward in an attempt to placate the muscle.

The twinge fades, but it is still there.

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I round the corner at mile six.

Within roughly a hundred feet of the turn, my right leg stiffens suddenly and completely, as though someone has thrust a steel rod from the ball of my foot to my hip, and the pain of it combines with the evisceration of all of my hope for the day to have me cry out and stagger to the side of the course, grasping the trunk of a pine to steady myself.

The cramp is along an interior thigh muscle and I simply don't know how to stretch it out without setting off a series of additional cramps.

I start first with regaining control of my breath. I close my eyes and reach my hands up to the sky, lengthening my body and thinking my way from my head to my feet, asking each group of muscles to relax and let go, to fall to the ground.

I get to my hips and legs. They're less interested in this conversation I am trying to start. I fold over on myself, stretching out the backs of my legs and having me come face to face with them.

*Come on guys. Come on.*

The cramp lets go but I can feel it, perched, silent and catlike and waiting to toy with me. Or kill me.

I walk for a few yards, then shuffle, then run.

Then the cramp returns and I stretch it out, again, then walk for a few yards, then shuffle, then run.

The sun comes out and stays out and falls heavily on my shoulders.

I look at my watch. My pace, thanks to this cycle of hyperkinesia, varies between fifteen and twenty minutes per mile.

My day has become very, very long.

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The effort required to get up and out of the River Road leg is significant, and along the rolling pavement that will lead me back into town, my world folds in upon itself.

I run whenever I can, but my stride is now being overwhelmed by the need to accommodate all these cramping muscles, so I am always off balance and confusing the rest of my body, fatiguing everything else as I wrestle to find a way to keep moving forward.

I am drinking everything I can at the aid stations, as I know I have a hydration issue, and I also know full well that if I begin to overheat my day is over. These fluids are already failing to reach my muscles in any meaningful way, and with the sun out in force now I have a real problem.

I focus on very few things, only allowing certain messages to reach me. The pain of the cramps is insistent, but I shut them out.

I instead latch onto the very dim but growing sound of the crowds at Lake Placid, because in that crowd are my wife and two girls, and I will not stop until I see them.

I imagine I can hear the girls' voices in that crowd somewhere.

This, coupled with the sound of my breath, becomes the entirety of my world for the next several miles as I labor to simply keep going.

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The descent into town is a nightmare, matched and exceeded by the climb up toward Mirror Lake. The sun is now taking its toll and I am in terrible, terrible shape – not simply walking but staggering, flailing forward, and at the same time trying to pull myself together for the girls. I don't want them to see me suffering like this.

As I head left into town, the last chapter begins, a familiar and dreadful story: I see the flashes, my vision narrows, and I begin to weave drunkenly.

I know how this ends.

And just ahead, I register Val and the girls right at the entrance to Mirror Lake Drive.

I refuse to let the girls see me collapse.

With quite literally everything I have, I steel myself and stagger toward them.

The girls are cheering and I gather them both into my arms, and bury my face in their hair, Sylvie's locks and Leonie's bangs sticking to the grim sweat and whiskers that frost my jaw.

Val tells me that I look great.

I tell her that I feel great.

Our mutual lies exchanged, I look her in the eye and tell her I will be back in three hours.

I doubt very much I will be able to keep this promise.

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I tear away from the kids and make my way forward.

I know it's coming, I just want to get far enough away from them that they won't see it.

I get maybe twenty yards down the road, far enough, I think to myself, and stumble to my knees.

The crowd, lined up three and four people deep at this point, howl encouragement for me to keep going.

I push up and stumble a few more steps forward, only to fall, heavily, again.

I'm in front of a group of younger spectators, and before I can tell them not to, one of them runs ahead to get a medic.

Another yells that the Special Needs tent is just ahead, and I cannot believe the timing of this – it is as though I have mis-programmed my body into thinking these races end at the Special Needs tent.

I need to pull myself together before the medic gets to me.

I push up to my knees, and look up at the kids near the barrier.

“Guys, help me... I need ice. I need a lot of ice.”

Charged by the opportunity to help, they start pulling cans of beer out of a cooler they have with them. Using the barrier as a crutch, I pull up to my feet and pull my shorts open at the waist.

“Dump half of it in here.”

They love the craziness of this order and the glacial slurry fills my tights and I snap the band shut.

I yank open my shirt - “Put the rest here.”

Again, the cooler is tipped over me and I am now a walking bag of ice, just in time, as the red-shirted medic shows up and hops the fence and reaches out to steady me as I struggle to keep my balance.

“I'm great!” I pre-emptively announce to him.

The spectators, having now adopted me, are demanding high fives as I stagger past, and one of them points at my shorts and tells me he's expecting to get his ice back after the race.

The medic asks the obligatory questions to determine just how great I am (what's my name, where am I from, how old am I) and I gamely answer the first few but I what I want to do is get to the next aid station for fluids and more ice, not play good to meet you with a stranger.

So we have a terse chat, the Medic and I, where I tell him he's welcome to follow me but could he please shut up and, *under no circumstances*, is he to take me to the medical tent.

And, swaddled in ice, I shuffle toward Special Needs.

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Now, with the letters from the girls and the New York bib number clutched in my hand, I am headed down Mirror Lake and into the back half of the race.

It takes a dawdling mile, but the ice is showing some signs of working – the tunnel vision recedes, the dizziness goes, and I am back to simply being in excruciating pain from cramps that attack my calves, my quads, and dozens of smaller muscles I don't even know the names of.

And I remain cloistered in the very small, very lonely world of torment I have been in for miles.

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I focus only on a few things, primarily breathing, and stop where I have to in order to pry the cramps from my calves or my thighs or wherever else they surface.

Whenever I see ice I get it dumped into my top and my shorts.

I apparently pass right by Val and the girls again on the way out of town but I have no recollection of this whatsoever.

She will later tell me I looked good.

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I am on the edge of a very fine precipice – a step too fast and I will overheat and cramp and my day will end. But I am already on fumes, and I need to get this race over with as soon as possible or there is a very real possibility my day will end in a ditch somewhere anyway.

I am constantly sweeping my body, looking for the next threat, making sure my breathing is steady and deep, checking my heart rate for spikes or lapses, keeping an eye on time, and making plans for the next aid station to make sure I make no mistakes at this point.

I must drink, I must take in calories, and I must keep myself cool.

I am always, always thinking ahead, planning contingencies for whatever else could possibly go wrong.

My watch chirps at me and I glance at the face.

“Low Battery” it announces, before it chirps again and the screen goes completely blank.

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Clouds close over the treetops. With no watch I have no information and no sense of pace, heart rate, or time and my race once again takes a step back into the primal.

There is simply breathing, and movement, and a very primitive goal: survival.

Leaden feet drag me along.

I am dumping ice into my jersey and shorts at every aid station, desperate to avoid overheating. I welcome the darkening skies, and as it starts to rain on me with the ski jumps barely visible in the background I note, for the first time, that I am actually cool, not just “not overheating”.

This is new information for me, but I cannot fully process it – my mind only has space, at this point, to manage the last crisis, which was heat. So, I keep dumping ice into my jersey at every opportunity, and welcome the rain even as I begin to shiver and I note, with detached interest, my fingertips turning a very light blue.

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I am up and out of that lonely canyon of misery, River Road. I have left the ski jumps behind and am on the rolling road back toward Placid itself. Time has simultaneously expanded and folded in on itself, I feel like I have been running (or not running) forever, and it may as well have been days ago, weeks ago, another life when I last saw my family or wasn't in motion and in pain.

Presently, though, something changes – finally, the marathon seems finite.

This may have happened when I finally got out of the teens to mile marker 20, as mentally the distance to the finish somehow became much more tangible.

All it is now, I tell myself, is the jog home from work, a distance I ran just about every single day for the past five years.

Except for the last few weeks because I was tapering.

Oh, and also because I quit my job, so there was no work to run home from any more.

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As the sun begins to fade behind the pines, a volunteer is handing out glow rings.

“It’s getting late” he says to me as he thrusts one forward.

I glare at him with a look that could kill.

“I’m aware of that”.

I take one, shuffle forward another few steps, then yell back at him.

“Give me another one!”

With two of the glow rings in one hand, the girls’ letters and my race number in the other, I keep going.

I tell myself that, if nothing else, I am going to get myself back into town because the girls will love the glow rings.

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“Aid Station: Beer” notes the sign in the front yard at roughly the 23<sup>rd</sup> mile, and I stagger past the dozen or so people crowded into the front yard and cheering the runners on.

I pass, smiling to myself, and perhaps ten yards down the road realize that I have actually smiled.

I smiled because, briefly, I was enjoying the moment I found myself in for the first time in hours. Felt optimistic.

I stop running and turn around and look back at the sign, the yard, the people cheering and the cooler full of beer.

What the hell, I tell myself.

I run back to them and, to the roar of the assembled crew, pull a can of Labatt’s Blue out of their cooler and pop it open.

“Cheers guys, and thanks...”

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The last few miles of the marathon are an odd blur.

While I am completely out of energy, I am still, somehow, running. The crowd is howling for everyone, and I am one of those everyones, and their cries pull me up the hill into the center of town.

I focus on movement to the exclusion of quite literally everything else – it is all I can do to remember to keep getting one foot in front of the other.

While I have no recollection of this, at some point, I apparently saw Val and girls in the crowd and jogged over to them to give the girls their glow rings before continuing on. The only reason I know this happened is that she snapped a quick picture of me with her phone as I crossed the course to them.

What I do remember, with clarity, is the excruciating turn to make the last, small out and back along Mirror Lake, as the turn takes me directly away from the finish line.

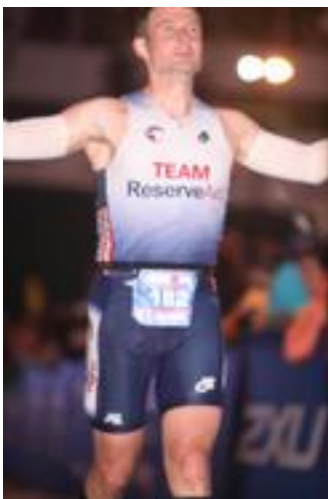
But I am still running.

The sun is setting and the sky is a glorious pink and I take off my cap so I can see it, trying to take my mind away from my legs, my feet, the fact that all I can think about, deliriously, is what an enormous luxury it will be to finally stop moving.

To be sedentary for the first time in over thirteen, maybe fourteen hours.

And the only place that can happen, I keep drilling into my mind, is the inch beyond the finish line.

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I am actually going to finish, it dawns on me.

I am coming down Mirror Lake Drive, going downhill for the first time in an eternity, and I am not stopping.

There is familiar yelling at some point, it's the girls, and Val herds them alongside me and they run with me on the other side of the barriers – I am moving slow enough that they are easily keeping pace with me despite having to weave their way through the crowd.

I lose sight of them at some point and make the turn into the oval and there are packed bleachers, and camera flashes, lights, and in front of me there is the finish line.

I am overwhelmed, I almost cannot believe what I am seeing, and instinctively as I approach I want to throw my hands up over my head in celebration, in thanks, and yet I am so utterly depleted that I can only get them up halfway.

I thus reach the finish line the very embodiment of inadvertent Christian symbolism, a sodden lumbering crucifixion, arms splayed to each side with my palms up and gaze heavenward, some great and invisible cross behind me and an indescribable combination of pain and joy and thanks and grace blanketing me.

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“Robbie Goffin from Brooklyn, YOU ARE AN IRONMAN”

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The doctor, a young woman, perches beside me in the medical tent.

I’m on a cot, gloriously supine, immobile and covered in blankets save my calves, which are having the cramps pulled out of them simultaneously by two trainers.

My left hand clutches my finisher’s medal. An IV drips saline into my arm.

“You know, Robbie, I haven’t been doing this all that long, but I’m not sure anyone has had a patient with both heat stroke and hypothermia in the same day.”

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I’m out of the medical tent after maybe an hour, warmed and rehydrated and with the cramping finally behind me, I find Val and the girls and I tell them that I am all right, that I am well, and that I am so glad to see them.

In the midst of burying myself in their simultaneous embraces, a tangle of arms and hair and kisses, I discover what I knew to be true hours ago – that I am indescribably ravenous.

Without an ounce of hesitation, I march off and eat half of a pepperoni pizza, drink almost a quart of chocolate milk, destroy three slices of watermelon, guzzle two cups of chicken soup, and am pushing cookies into my face like a madman when Sylvie’s high, clear voice carries itself above the crowd. Trapped behind the barriers, she is incensed.

“DAD! I TOLD YOU TO SAVE ME SOME WATERMELLON!”

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In the dark, it is Val who retrieves my bike.

She then shepherds the girls and I into the truck, and drives us back to the campsite.

She gets me into the tent, wrestles my stiff legs into my sleeping bag, and zips it to my neck to mummify me in warmth and comfort and stillness.

I am starting to slip away into a deep, deep sleep as I feel her pulling my left hand free from the bag.

With this action, the woman whose husband just left his job for an uncertain future, who proposed that she spend the next few years living with her kids in a pickup truck while he thinks about his life, and who has just nearly killed himself voluntarily to balm a wound that existed solely in his mind and his mind alone, is holding that hand, gently, and pushing a wedding band back in its place.

And while I had spent the past few hours luxuriating in the knowledge that I have finished, my last waking thought is the realization that I have just begun.

R.