

Redemption

A Return to the Scene of the Crime Makes Everything Good Again.

BY RACHEL TOOR

I loved *I Love Lucy*. I loved Lucy. And you know what? Some days are Lucy days. Nothing goes right, you get yourself into messes, you get all dirty, other people find humor in your situation, and eventually everything works out. Desi comes home none the wiser for your adventures and mishaps and kisses you on the head.

It was to be my first race in my new home state, a 50K, my favorite distance: longer than a marathon but easier. I had heard great things about it (the course was beautiful) and not such great things (the race was poorly organized). But I was ready to race, ready to roll, and roll out of bed at 3:30 A.M. I did, giving myself plenty of time to cover the hour and half drive to make a 7:00 A.M. start.

There aren't many roads out here in the sparsely populated West. That I was able to get lost—deeply, profoundly, 30 miles-out-of-the-way-headed-north-instead-of-south lost—is a tribute to how poor my sense of direction is, an achievement, really. As I drove through a geography of voluptuous mountains and rocky, shale-showered hills, I noticed the natural beauty even as I swore at the clock in my car, the illumination of the digits becoming less sharp as the sun rose and I realized that there was no way, even once I had turned myself around, that I could make it to the start of the race on time.

I did not. The Web site had directed me, without pretense of giving real directions, to something called “Legal Tender.” I didn't have a clue what Legal Tender was, other than in some vague financial sense. Turns out, Legal Tender is a bar. The bar, when I found it, was closed (it was just past seven in the morning; I was not unhappy to see that bars were closed at this hour) and there was no indication that an ultramarathon had ever begun there.

I found a guy wandering around the parking lot and asked whether he had seen a pack of wan and weedy runners go by. “Yeah,” he said, from beneath a dirty baseball cap, “They ran under the interstate and along the frontage road.” I drove until I found a familiar herd of runners, laden with water bottles and fanny packs, talking and laughing as they jogged along the paved road. I pulled my car up close, dangerously close, to a barbed wire fence on the side of the road and

jumped out. I took mental stock: I made sure that a number of women had already passed by, I tightened the laces on my trail shoes, and I started running.

INTO THE FRAY

The paved road gave way to dirt, and what had been, at first, rolling hills became one long ascent, an unremitting climb. Wide and rutty, the road climbed—we climbed—beside pastures etched into the sides of mountains. I ran easily. Since I had missed the race, this would be, for me, just a run. I wanted to enjoy it.

It was a long way to the first aid station. I accosted the volunteers and explained my situation: I had arrived late to the start and hadn't been able to register. Because the entry fee was uncharacteristically steep for this kind of event, I had decided not to enter in advance, assuming, since nothing was said on the Web site, that I would be able to sign my forms and fork over my money on race day.

I do not approve of bandits. Even at the Boston Marathon, where there is a time-honored tradition of running without a number, without having paid for goods and services, without signing the appropriate indemnification of the race directorship, I do not approve of bandits. I reckoned in such a small race—there were only 30 people in the 50K and another 30 in the 100K—I would be able to settle up with the race director at the finish. But I knew, too, that the volunteers on the course would have to account for me. I gave them my name and told them that I wanted to sign a proxy for the race waiver. I was assured by friendly aid station workers that they would call ahead to the race director and let her know that I was on the course, and was sent off on my way.

Each time I passed a woman I alerted her to the fact that I wasn't racing. I would sidle up behind, say hello, and explain that I didn't have a number, I wasn't competing. Even those who acted like they didn't think of themselves as racing knew exactly where in the group of women they stood. Women say they just want to finish. Women say they just want to have a good time. Women do not say to each other: "I'm here to win, to kick your ass and break the course record. And then, after the race, I want to have a beer with you."

I settled in behind Dana, running in third place, who, I learned, had been coming to the race with her dad since she was a teenager. Now, at 26, she was running it for the sixth time, in the company of her husband, Rino, just ahead. Her dad was behind. They were part of a contingent of Canadians who come each year for this tiny little race, giving it a family reunion atmosphere.

We chatted, and then I couldn't help it: I started laughing. Who says that ultras are without spectator support? While we ran, we were watched—and I want to believe, no, I do believe, cheered—by a number of strong and sturdy cows with whom we were clearly, and in slippery, stinky, telltale fashion, sharing the trail. They watched as we passed, and we heard them mooing, calling, cheering. Yes, cheering.

We ran on single track up through an area that had been decimated by fire. It was eerily beautiful, a cliché of the cycle of life: ravaged trees, tall skeletons, stood anorexic, while their chubby little sisters, fresh and green, grew up among them.

MEN ON THE MOUNTAIN

Dana started to fade and urged me to go on ahead. I picked up my pace and continued, constantly climbing, to arrive at an aid station at the top of the mountain staffed by men who were clearly runners, huddled around a campfire. I launched into my windy explanation—missed the start, will sign a waiver—and they stopped me. They didn't care whether I had registered; they just wanted to know what they could get for me. Water? Electrolyte fluids? Cookies? Pretzels? What do you need? What can we give you? This is why I like racing.

What I knew about the course is that from there it went down three miles to another aid station. Then you had to turn around and come right back up. That makes for hard running, flying down steep slopes knowing that soon you will be slogging back up. But out-and-backs provide a welcome opportunity to take a measure of the race: I watched the leaders, tall young men, with legs long and strong, as they powered up the hill I was pounding down. I saw the first- and second-place women, saw the look in their eyes when they realized I was there—recognized that look from my own racing—and soothed and smoothed the way by explanation and assurances.

At the turnaround, I did my song and dance for the volunteers. “How did you get lost?” they wanted to know, knowing that the race was within spitting distance of the exit off the interstate. They smiled and told me I was doing well. I asked for salt tablets and grabbed a handful of mini-Butterfingers and some animal crackers and left them shaking their heads at my lack of directional ability.

I climbed, eating my cookies, biting off the heads first the way you have to when you're eating food in the shapes of animals, trying to shake out of my head the song that had been with me for the last 15 miles—Dave Matthews, “The Space Between.” It wasn't unpleasant going back up, not at all. I ran and then walked, the way we ultrarunners do, walking with a purpose, with vigor, and then running again.

I began to smell the campfire and was greeted by the sound of my own name, by the voices of the handsome running men. I was back. I loved this aid station and had thought, more than once, on the way back up about how happy I would be to pass by there again. It had everything a runner could want: candy, Canadian whiskey, and hot men. But when I got back to the summit, all I wanted was oxygen—more ambient oxygen.

Pushing down the hill I caught the second woman, Jackie, a local runner. She had been running with a guy, but we quickly lost him, picking up the pace while

we chatted, telling each other our stories, our lives, the way women do. She was a mother and sneaked in her training where she could. I allowed as how there should be a separate division in races for women with children—I know well, though only from observation, the weariness of working mothers. Jackie was doing the 50K instead of the 100K this year and was starting to flag. She told me that the woman ahead was, like us, in her 40s, that she was a strong runner. She told me that she always came in second in the race, second in the age division. She didn't want to get passed, but she knew she couldn't win.

“Go on ahead,” she said to me, apologizing for walking an uphill. I thought about it for a nanosecond and said: “If you want to be alone, I will go ahead. But I'm not here to race, and it's nice to have the company. If it would help you to have me here, to run in with you, I'll stay.” She didn't have to think about it, so neither did I. We continued, talking about how many miles we had left, how much time she thought it would take her, and what her best time for the course was. I was back in the position where I am most comfortable—pacing; not thinking about my own race, not racing, but helping someone do her best.

A FINISH—AND NOT A FINISH

The last mile and half was on a dirt road. I began to look over my shoulder, not wanting Jackie to be passed near the finish. I ran in front, pulling her in my wake. We talked less and crossed the line—she crossed the line, I stepped to the side—in a time that bettered her personal best by 13 minutes. It had been a good day.

As I finished I explained my plight, for the sixth time, to the man at the finish. He was the race director, with his wife. He shrugged and said OK. I went off to see what there was to eat.

There was a small fire, and a huddle of us stood around it, shifting our weight from side to side, allowing fatigued muscles to rest. Jackie had already related my story of getting lost en route to the race and folks congratulated me on my effort, speculating on how I would have done if I had actually arrived on time. I soaked up the attention—I do soak up attention—recounting my *I Love Lucy* adventure to get to the start (complete with a cop flashing his scary lights from across the other side of the—thankfully—divided highway) to a group of people who I hoped, I dearly hoped, would become friends. It was a small group, a good community, a reminder of why I love so much to go to races.

Forgoing harshly fried chicken and fluorescent potato salad that came from a milk carton, I looked around for something to eat. Someone pulled out a bag of marshmallows, graham crackers, Hershey bars and I ran—I did not walk, I ran—to get a stick. I impaled a gooey, gummy marshmallow on my spear, stood close to the warmth of the fire, and got ready to be really happy.

A voice boomed, asking for me. I looked up from my marshmallow. A woman, barrel shaped on skinny legs, marched me away from the crowd and started in.

She didn't introduce herself; I was left to assume that she was the race director. Her voice was barely controlled chaos: How dare I? What was I thinking? Why had I run the race without paying my entry fee? Who did I think I was? I had stolen from all the good people who had registered for the race.

Oh, dear. What would Lucy do? I looked for a rock to crawl under. I tried not to make funny faces. I decided to stick with the truth.

In fact, I explained to the woman who looked at me like I was a dog who had gotten into the garbage, I had e-mailed her earlier in the week, asking for directions to the start (I know well my weaknesses) and telling her I was planning to cover the race for a national running magazine. I never heard back. I apologized 578 times and gave her an account of my attempts to make it OK (her aid station volunteers backed me up on my insistence on signing my name). Her anger was unquenchable. How dare I run without registering? I told her that since the Web site didn't say "No race day registration," I assumed it would be possible to do so in the ample amount of time I had left myself to get there in the morning. No. I screwed up. I apologized again.

Finally, we got to the heart of the matter: money. She wanted the \$100 check I had in my car. Of course, I said, I would give it to her—once I got back to my car (the start was about fourteen miles from the finish—I wasn't entirely sure where my car was). I said I would mail it. She sneered. She growled.

I slunk back to the fire and was taken into the huddle of other runners; we went back to doing what runners do after races: talking about what we were running next. Jackie gave me a lift back to my car, and we spoke about mutual friends—even after such a short time living in a new home, entering the company of ultrarunners had given me a set of friends—and thought about the totality of my race experience. Yeah, it was a drag not making it to the start. Yeah, it was belittling to be yelled at like a child, a breach of the sense of community that is a large part of the reason we all go to these nutty, out-of-the-way races.

Finally, I just thought about Lucy. Lucy always made it through. She believed in the basic goodness of people and that no matter how zany the situation you got yourself into, it would, in the end, all work out.

In the end, it all worked out.

THE RERUN

A year later the mean old race director had retired. (Not because of me. Do not make the mistake of confusing correlation with causation. Really. It wasn't my fault.) The races, a 50K and a 100K, had been conflated: now there would simply be a 50-miler on a new course with a new race director.

Did I want to go back?

I had spent most of the summer writing and was just starting to get into shape again. The month before, I had done the World Championship Ride and Tie, which,

for the first time ever, was in my new home state. I had planned to partner with my friend Nikki Kimball, the ultrastudette, but the only horse we could find to lease for the race was too expensive for the likes of us. Nikki bowed out, and I went up to the race site to camp for the week and hang out with old friends, resigned to not racing but looking forward to being able to volunteer to help out.

The days before the race, I had a number of partner possibilities, all of which fell through. One guy had a horse he wanted someone else to be able to use because he couldn't, having broken his hand. The guy he was planning to partner with was left partnerless, so perhaps we could team up. The next day that guy was kicked by a horse and out of the picture.

The race was on Saturday. Late Friday afternoon, I was sitting around with my friend Elaine Ruprecht and her 13-year-old daughter, Sarah. I kept asking Elaine to let me have Sarah for the race, but the young speedster was taking some time off—she runs sub-six minute miles—and preferred to crew. The Ruprecht family has been doing ride and tie since the beginning of the sport. Elaine's mother was teamed up this year with Ken Shirk, known to many in the ultra community as much for his wackiness as for his part in the early years of Western States. He goes by "Cowman." Elaine's husband, Jim Howard, the person who has won more ride and ties than anyone else, was teaming up this year with Mark Richtman, the runner-up in numbers of championships bagged. Elaine usually races with her brother-in-law, Tom Gey (his wife, Carol, was partnering with the Ruprecht paterfamilias), but Tom was coming up a little lame. Elaine is a working mom with lots of red hair and a big hearty laugh. I've known her for years, and she is always fun to be around. We decided to become a team and pledged to do the race only for fun. The woman/woman division was stacked with talent. (The man/man and man/woman categories, however, looked pretty much like a lock from the beginning.)

THE WINNERS—AND THE WINNINGS

The end of the story is that we had a great time—laughing loudly through the 35-mile course—and, in the end, surprising ourselves by winning the woman/woman division by 18 seconds, beating out exotic dancer Anne Langstaff and her partner, Rufus Schneider, a horseshoer. I asked Elaine if she thought we had scored some cool, wearable trophy—a shirt, a hat, even a jacket. (I run for the goodies.) Oh, my God, she said. We just won \$1,000. For the first time in a long time, there was prize money. Neither of us had remembered during the race. It was a pleasant surprise.

I hadn't been on a horse for a while before the race (funny: you move to Montana and can't find a horse to ride) and was a bit sore. I took some time off and then ran the Headwaters Relay, an event that was designed by Don Demetriades

(Nikki Kimball's partner) and his grad-school friend Max. The race went from near Bozeman to the source of the Missouri, the place from which water must travel farthest to get to the Atlantic. It was 230 miles over three days, much of it following the trail of Lewis and Clark, except that what most people don't realize is that old Lewis and Clark veered off and never made it to the actual headwaters.

Teams consisted of six to 10 people. (Ours had seven, including some very fast runners.) Each day we ran our race legs and ended up in a river, soaking our weary legs, and then we set up our tents. It was like summer camp. The scenery—the fish-ridden Madison River, meadows dotted with wildflowers at 9,000 feet, Beaver Rock (see Lewis and Clark lore), deer and antelope playing—was some of the best Montana has to offer. And that's saying a lot.

Doing these wacky races was fun, but I still wasn't particularly fit. I had been slogging through long runs with no leg speed. I knew I should go to the track, but then, I know I should eat more vegetables and have health insurance. Doesn't mean I'm going to do it.

The 50-miler was beckoning. My friend Kevin was going, using it as a training run for the Bear 100-miler. I needed to get serious about my own fitness, having volunteered to pace at the New York City Marathon a few months hence. After the ride and tie and the relay, I had gotten into the whole camping thing. (As long as I had my gigantic foam pad on which to sleep. Can you say "car camping?") So, OK, I would do the race. And instead of driving up the morning of the race, I would go the night before and camp out like the self-sufficient Montana girl I had become.

One of the many ways the race had changed was that the start was in a different place. I followed directions carefully and got there easily. I met the (new) race director, who was a friend of my friend Kevin's. I ate some pasta and talked the kind of talk you talk at prerace dinners. Then I went to the campsite to set up my tent.

Setting up my tent has proved to be the most difficult part of camping. It's one of those easy-to-set-up things. Very cute. But for some reason, I can never remember which way the poles go. It takes hours to get the thing up. Then, for some reason, the floor of the tent is never on the ground. It kind of pops up, which means I can't really stake it down, which I can't do anyway because I can never drive those little stakes into the hard Montana dirt. The flyleaf is always going on backward or sideways and it takes forever to figure that out. I never said I was a good camper. I just said that I liked it.

Race morning dawned before dawn, before night was even over. It never occurred to me that we were going to be starting in the dark. Last year, it was light by the time I got to the race—oh, yeah, I was late, and it was only 50K. But now it was dark, dark, dark. I managed to find Kevin (he's very tall) and told him that I needed him to shine his light for me. Kevin's a bright, shiny guy and

he readily agreed. He and Steve, the race director, were going to run together. Slowly, he said.

So we set out. I loved the fact that the race director was also running the race, though I thought he was crazy for doing so. As we all know, directing a race can be harder than running it. Steve had warned the runners that we would be cursing him, calling him all manner of foul names, particularly at mile 39, where the course goes steeply and longly uphill. That he would be right there, cursing himself, was comforting.

THE REVENGE OF THE BOVINES

It was also comforting to have the person who designed the course running with us. Steve had brought more flagging, since the elk whose territory we were invading seemed particularly fond of eating the orange strips. But for the first part of the race, it wasn't elk but cows that proved problematic. And it wasn't precisely cows, but cow products that were the issue. In the first 10 miles, I fell five times, twice headfirst into piles of cow poop.

But blood and dirt and cow shit wasn't my problem. My problem was that by mile two, I knew I was in trouble. I just didn't feel good, didn't feel like myself. I struggled to keep up with Kevin and Steve, even though I knew they were going really slowly. Perhaps it was the higher elevation—about 3,000 feet above what I was used to. Perhaps it was not getting enough sleep the entire week before the race. Perhaps it was that the gods had conspired against me. But I knew it was going to be a long day. Before the race, I figured it would take me about 10 hours to finish. I quickly realized that probably wasn't the case, and then I stopped thinking about time. That way madness lies.

I lost Kevin and Steve when they stayed back to do more course marking. I was running along, and a guy in front of me by about 100 yards suddenly stopped. He turned and looked into the woods. "Blackberries," I heard him call out. Big deal, I thought. In this part of the world, huckleberries are the fruit of note. When I got to the first aid station, not long after, they asked if I had seen the bear. Oh. He had said "Black bear." And I missed it. A year in Montana and I had still not seen a bear. Missing this one was perhaps the greatest disappointment of the race.

Going up a relentless uphill, I heard chattering behind me. I was panting and some guy was yukking it up back there. I turned to look. Steve. And Kevin. And a couple of others. So I took the opportunity to rest—I mean, wait for them.

They were still telling (bad) jokes. They were still singing '80s songs, or at least, reciting the lyrics. They were still having fun. Me, not so much. Their longer legs took them away, up, up and away, and I was once again alone.

The country looked familiar. I had remembered how beautiful the burnt forest had looked, and it did not disappoint on a second viewing. Then I remembered

the horrendous uphill that was just ahead. It was the climb to the peak where last year I was greeted by hot guys, candy, and whiskey. This year I had given up candy (and cookies and cake and ice cream) as my New Year's resolution. Living on my own and not cooking—not even owning any pots and pans—I often ended eating Tootsie Rolls for breakfast, peanut M&M's for lunch, and Cherry Garcia for dinner. Something had to change. My motto is: nothing in moderation. So it had been cold turkey on sugar for the last eight months, and I was rather proud of myself. I had debated whether I would allow myself “ultra exceptions.” It's hard enough to get calories in during a long race; doing it without the quick fixes of cookies and candy would be a challenge. But I was on a streak, and in the words of the immortal Crash Davis, you don't mess with a streak. /QQ: “...a player on a streak has to respect the streak.” XQQ/ So I knew that at the top, there would be no Snickers bars for me.

EVEN THE RACE DIRECTOR MORPHED INTO SOMETHING ELSE

As it turned out, the hot running men had morphed this year into older guys sporting cowboy hats and big, shiny rodeo buckles. They were cooking up salmon. I had not given up salmon, but the idea of eating it less than half way through a 50-miler was about as appealing as the cow pies I had fallen into. I saw Kevin standing around and asked where Steve was. He pointed to a lump on the ground. I had never seen the race director without a hat and didn't recognize him. He was cuter without the hat, but he was also a bit of a mess—dehydrated and exhausted. He had decided to sit for a spell at the top of the peak.

The cowboys refilled my bottle and asked why I wasn't smiling. I growled at them. I snarled. I told them I was tired and whose idea was it to run this stupid thing anyway? They responded appropriately: they laughed at me, filled my bottles, and told me that when I came back after the loop, eight and a half miles later, they wanted to see me smiling.

I set off, and Kevin trotted beside me. Steve didn't know whether he was going to finish or drop, so Kevin was forging on. I warned him that I was having a terrible day. Even so, I asked if he knew how many women were ahead of me (I claimed I didn't care, and even if I did, there wasn't anything I could do about it, but I did care, sort of, and felt rotten about it). He said he would keep me company, if I wanted company. I told him that it wasn't going to be pretty. He didn't care.

As it was happening, I recognized it. But still, it was hard. Kevin was doing pacer duty for me. I whined and complained, and he encouraged and cajoled. I gave voice to all of my random thoughts and feelings: embarrassment and then rationalization—in front of whom should I be embarrassed? No one cared about my finishing place or my time, no one. I shouldn't either. But still, it was hard. I hated having to give up the competitive ghost—there were two women in front

of me and I wasn't going to catch them, not today. I hated having the competitive ghost always on my shoulders. Why couldn't I just relax and enjoy it, run, not race? I feared that I wouldn't be able to finish, or that if I did, I would be worrying about missing the cutoff of 16 hours. And I apologized, nonstop, to Kevin for my poor performance. I knew that it mattered to him not at all. I knew this because so many times I had been in that position and had reassured plenty of runners that it didn't matter to me if they were slow. I had done that last year when I ran with Jackie and told her to hush when she apologized for walking the uphills. But even as I knew it, I couldn't shut up about it.

Kevin is an attorney. He is used to listening patiently and keeping his own counsel. He just kept telling me that I would be fine, that I would get a second wind, not to worry.

By the time we got back up to the cowboys, I was able to manage a smile. By the time we started on the gigantic steep nasty downhill, I was able to run. For the first time all day, at mile 35, I felt good. I knew I had Kevin to thank for that.

We reached the aid station at the bottom, manned by women who had peeled the oranges for us and kept reciting the list of what they had to offer—banana? cookie? pretzels? peanut butter and jelly? salt tabs? Coke? Wheat Thins? Powerade? banana? cookie?—until one hit and you thought, *Oh yeah, that sounds good*. These were experienced race volunteers. Kevin took off up the hill, I grabbed a huge handful of Wheat Thins (I really wanted a cookie, but a resolution is a resolution) and carried on.

Then I caught up to Charlie, a radical, progressive, smart doc who lives in Kalispell with his wife and kids and, I learned, new baby. We had met last year around the campfire. He had and his wife had laughed at my Lucy-like adventures, and we all had a great time. He said that either he was having a great day today or Kevin and I were really in trouble. He said, I've never been this close to Kevin at this point in a race before. I allowed that while he may be having a good race, Kevin was back here because he had been babysitting me.

CHARLIE'S DAY HAD (FINALLY) COME

But the fact was, Charlie was having a great race. He had been running ultras for only four years, and things were starting to gel for him. I would pass him on the downhills and he would plow by me when we began to climb again. The temperature had been rising alarmingly throughout the day, and it was now probably in triple digits. We were on the face of a mountain that was exposed to the sun. But it gave us extraordinary views of a lake and you couldn't help but stop to appreciate it. Three cheers for natural beauty, I said.

I had checked out the last mile or so of the race the day before so that I would know when I was approaching the barn. When I realized that this long day was

nearly over—12 hours after I started—I perked up. There was a guy ahead of me with whom I had been trading places for the last 10 miles or so; he looked back and saw me. He picked up his pace. I let him go. I had no interest in doing anything but finishing.

Right after crossing the line, I was directed into the creek by the young daughter of one of the runners. I looked down. It looked like a steep climb to get in there, but she assured me that the other runners who had finished had spent quality time in there and had come out much happier. So into it I went, skiing down the muddy incline, and, yes, oh yes, it was good. Glacial water on miserable legs was just the ticket. It was good. But then I needed to get out and couldn't. I thought about crying out, "Help me, help me, I'm stuck in the creek," but I didn't have the energy to do that. I thought about crying, but I knew the hard part was over and so, after many sloppy attempts, I managed to scale the bank and drag my sorry self over to the finish, where Kevin and Charlie and the guy who had finished just ahead of me were hanging out and eating, yes, again, deeply fried chicken. New race director, same icky food.

I got my camp chair out of the car (I'm a camper; I have a camp chair) and plopped down with a plate of chicken. The guy who had seen the bear asked me if I had seen the bear. I said no, but then I realized that I had seen him somewhere before. I said: "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" We tried to figure out where it was and we both came on the answer at the same time. Just as he said, "Last fall at the Lewis and Clark Marathon," I said: "It's you. You're the one. You're the guy who sped up to beat me."

His name was Sam, and we had a conversation about men whose goal is to beat the first woman. It wasn't really a conversation. It was me, ranting and raving and hectoring and accusing. It seems my second wind of the day was coming out of my big fat mouth. Sam claimed he wasn't that kind of guy, but that when he saw me that day, at the end of the marathon, with less than half a mile to go, after, he claimed, having run by himself for a long time, he got motivated to speed up.

I said: "No way, bucko," and reminded him that when he had turned and saw me he had said something like, "Oh shit, a woman," and took off.

I asked if he had ended up beating me, because honestly, I couldn't remember and didn't really care. He remembered. He said that he had beaten the first woman by something like 10 seconds. I said, for the 37th time in five minutes, that he was one of those guys.

Because this was a friendly conversation, and because while he may be one of those guys (though I'm inclined to think not), he was certainly a nice guy, Sam spent the rest of the afternoon trying to make it up to me, offering to get me food and drink.

NO SHINY METAL OBJECT THIS TIME

There had been, in fact, two women ahead of me in this race, but any hopes of a shiny metal object vanished when I learned that we were all masters. Old women rock, I said, as I got up to get more chicken (I appreciated the offer but couldn't let Sam serve me, since he had beaten me for the second time). Everyone who finished in the top 10 was over 40, and some were over 50.

While last year it had been chilly at the finish, this year it was delightful to sit around and drink beer (or diet A&W Root Beer, my hydration liquid of choice) and, surprisingly, to eat disgusting fried chicken. We chatted and hung out and cheered for finishers, and then the awards started.

The co-race director Brian, a speedy runner himself, was brisk and efficient at passing out the goods. Midway through the ceremony, a runner came in. It was Steve, a little dehydrated, a little haggard, but in good spirits and, as always, laughing and joking. We applauded him. I marveled at him. Not only had he managed to recover enough to keep running, but he had put on a flawless event in the first year of its (re)organization. And he did it with grace and humor and the comradely sense of community that seems peculiar to the culture of very long races. His response to the stress and difficulties of the task of race management was to be always calm (at least outwardly) and always generous. The way he accepted the thanks of appreciative runners—after what had been not only a grueling day but weeks of planning and logistical nightmares—was a lesson in congeniality.

As I drove home, I thought about that, about how it's a message for all of us who wax perfectionistic, who care so much about doing a good job that sometimes it's hard to remember why we are doing it in the first place. I know I would not make a good race director. I would be more like the mean old woman from the year before; the stress I felt would no doubt get passed along to unsuspecting bystanders who would be caught unawares and then get pissed off and talk—or write—about what a bitch I had been, when I had been trying only to do my job and to hold together that unruly organism that is a race. After the emotions quieted from my first-year's experience, I felt not only sympathy but empathy for the woman who had taken on the thankless task of race directing. Yeah, she had been a bitch to me. But I had a pretty good idea of what her day had been like, and after the race had faded into memory, I could no longer blame her.

When I thought about Steve, doing all of that and then doing the race as well, I got that corny, postrace, exhausted rush of emotion. It was—in a word too tired to be applied to anything having to do with sports, but I'll go ahead and use it anyway—inspiring.

And then I got lost three times trying to get back home.

