

## X-COUNTRY

by Robert Reed

*Our stories often need to bear “Don’t try this at home” warnings. In this case, however, we’re happy to encourage readers to take up cross-country running. But if you find yourself facing a course like the one described in this story, well, don’t say we didn’t warn you...*

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The new fellow never talked about himself much, and details came out in little dribbles. But he mentioned having once been a teenager in the hill country—a stretch of poor farms and limestone bluffs about an hour north of town. He had a favorite few tales about running cross-country for the local high school: His Phys Ed teacher first saw his potential and egged him into running competitively. Without training and with a naturally lousy sense of pace, the recruit managed to finish dead last for a desperately weak team. But after another year of growth and three thousand miles underfoot, he became a powerful Senior. Laughing at his own misfortunes, our new friend claimed that he could have enjoyed a spectacular year, except that on the eve of the season’s first race he got a wicked case of shin splints and he didn’t run another two steps until after the State Championship was in the books.

Kip Logan was his name, as far as anybody can tell. A few of us—our most imaginative/paranoid citizens—still liked to dwell on the gaps and little question marks in his personal history. For instance, nobody felt quite sure where Kip was before he came to live with us, or what he did, or how he made his money. Nobody could remember him mentioning parents or any siblings of consequence, and nobody ever stepped forward to say yes, they knew him as a boy. But then again, doesn’t everybody have gaps and incongruities in their life story? Think about it: You would be hard-pressed to write the definitive biography of your very best friend. And Kip was never more than a close acquaintance to any of us. Besides, his hometown nearly died when its quarries were shut down, and a year later, the county consolidated its schools, boarding up his old high school in the process.

Whoever Kip was, he always acted like a genuinely friendly fellow, throwing out big smiles while speaking to us with slow, pleasant tones. As a general rule, people didn’t consider him particularly bright. But everybody has to wonder now. When we talk about him, we always seem to mention how careful he was. The man never boasted about his successes, and he never lectured to us, and I am the only person who can remember him knowing anything that you wouldn’t think he would know. Even after a lifetime spent running, he happily claimed to be helpless when it came to calculating a reliable pace time.

Talking about himself, Kip Logan always used excessively humble tones. And frankly, his physical appearance helped this illusion of simplicity: He was tall and pretty-boy handsome, with long legs that carried a muscled body and a pair of

shoulders far broader than typical for a quality distance runner. A lifetime of wind and sun had barely abused his skin, which was gold in the summer and ruddy-chalk in the depths of winter. His hair was thick and exceptionally blond. Yet he openly admitted that a portion of that rich mane was artificial. Male-pattern baldness had cropped up a few years ago, and he'd patched the gaps with an implanted carpet. As for his age, I think it's safe to say that Kip looked like a youthful man-child of forty or forty-one. In other words, he was a spectacularly well-preserved creature greatly enjoying his middle fifties.

I've spoken to a few local race directors about old Kip. Entry forms have certain mandatory details: You supply your name and address, phone numbers and T-shirt size. And you have to admit your age on race day, plus give your date of birth. Why both figures are necessary, I'm not sure. Maybe it's to keep clumsy liars out of the mix. But I've studied a few of Kip's old entry forms, and in every case, the man was precisely twenty-three days younger than me.

Whenever we raced, Kip beat me, and not just by a little bit. Which meant that he had a chokehold on our age group, plus all of the gift certificates and little gold-painted medals that come with that rarified distinction.

Waivers are another common feature in race entries. And there is always a single line at the bottom where you supply your signature and the date. To what degree a waiver matters, I don't know. I've endured in some horrendously organized events, and if somebody had died because of the lousy traffic control or the lack of paramedics, I'm sure somebody else's ass would have been sued, regardless of any name scribbled as an afterthought.

For thirty-some years, I have run competitive races, and easily, Kip's waiver was the best that I've ever read:

"Cross country is a brutal sport meant for self-abusive personalities," he wrote, "and I, the undersigned, am a major-league idiot for trying this damned thing. If anything bad should happen to me, and it probably will, I have nobody to blame but my stupid self. And with that in mind, I promise to expect the unexpected, and I will tolerate the miserable, and if I die on the course, I would prefer to be buried exactly where I fall...."

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Kip told it this way: After thirty-five years spent in other places, he came home again. By home, he didn't mean the town where he grew up, since that tiny crossroads had just about expired. No, he moved to our city, purchasing a baby mansion on the rich-person's boulevard. Paying for it in cash, one persistent rumor would claim. Where that money came from was always a puzzler. On occasion, Kip mentioned working overseas for some obscure Dutch corporation. Malaysia and Brazil played roles in the occasional aside. And more than once, he muttered a few

words about investments in real estate and stocks, smiling in a beguiling fashion whenever he admitted, “My guesses did a little bit better than average.”

Kip was an immediate force in the local running scene. He entered every race at our end of the state, always placing among the top ten or fifteen males—a tremendous achievement for a citizen who could see Social Security looming. He worked out with the fast groups as well as linking up with a few notable talents who usually trained by themselves. And he began showing up at track club meetings and our various social functions. During that first year, he simultaneously dated two young women—gazelles nearly as fast on their feet as he was. As for employment, Kip seemed to lack both the time and the need. He wasn’t retired so much as he was incredibly busy with the disciplined life of an eternal athlete. Hard runs were woven around sessions in the weight room, plus he was a regular in both yoga and pilates classes. His diet was rich with nuts and green leaves, and he never drank more than half a beer. And where our local twenty-five-year-old stallions were a grim, brutally competitive lot, Kip seemed utterly at ease with himself. Wearing his boyish zest along with a killer wardrobe, he liked to drive around town in a BMW—a convertible, of course—waving at his many good acquaintances while the blond hair rippled in the wind.

I would confess to feeling envious of Kip, but “envy” doesn’t do my complicated feelings justice.

And I liked the man. Always.

So far as I know, I was first to hear about Kip’s cross-country race. He’d been living with us for nearly fourteen months. On Thursdays, half a dozen old dogs would meet up at Calley Lake to run tempos. It was two miles to the lap, and a good tempo is supposed to be twenty seconds a mile slower than your honest 10K pace. Kip and I decided to do three miles. A lap and a half. He finished at least ninety seconds ahead of me. By the time I reached the mark, he was breathing normally, smiling happily, offering me a buoyant “Good job” as I staggered to a halt beside him.

It was a hot afternoon in May. I needed water, and he drank a little sip from the fountain, as if to be polite. Then we started trotting that last mile around the lake, heading back for the starting line and the younger forty-something runners who were already finishing their four miles.

Kip was capable of an innocent, almost goofy smile.

Something about the blue eyes and that endless grin made people believe there wasn’t much inside his pretty-boy head. “A blond with implants,” was the often-heard joke. And his voice was usually slow and careful, as if his words needed to be examined, singly and together, before any sentence could be shown to the world.

“Don,” he said to me. “I’m thinking about holding a race.”

“Yeah?” I said.

“An X-country race.”

He said it that way. “X” as in the letter, and then “country.”

“Cross-country?” I asked.

He didn’t say yes or no. Instead, he let his big smile get bigger and the blue eyes dreamier, and staring off into the watery distance, he told me, “At my old stomping grounds. On the trails outside Enderville. What do you think?”

“When?”

“This October,” he said. “If there’s a free weekend.”

Our local marathon was at the beginning of November, and there was a tune-up 15K four weeks earlier. But those other weekends were probably available.

“Sounds like fun,” I allowed.

“I hope it sounds fun.” Then he glanced at me. “You know, I just had an idea. Just this minute.”

I didn’t believe him. Something about his manner felt false. Although why that was and why I remember a detail like that, I don’t know. And besides, what did it matter when he actually dreamed up anything?

“I’ll have to map out a course,” he said.

I didn’t know the hill country. But I’d driven past it on occasion, and from the highway, those bluffs seemed brutally rough.

“Prize money,” he said. “What do you think?”

“It’s up to you.”

“As an incentive,” he explained.

“Are you going to run the race yourself?” I asked.

“I shouldn’t, no.” Laughing quietly, he pointed out, “I’ll have too much to do just running the finish line.”

That was welcome news. I told Kip, “Prize money would be an exceptionally good thing.”

“How much?”

“As much as you can afford,” I suggested, working hard to sound as if I might, just might, be kidding.

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Kip had a huge box of entry forms printed up, and he asked some of the quicker runners to help put them on windshields after the Sassafras 5K. I agreed, but as it happened, my right hip—my touchy hip—started hurting during the second mile, pulling me back into the middle of the pack. By the time I finished, I was limping, and by the time I found Kip, the chore was done.

“Ice,” Kip suggested, noting my rocking gait.

I nodded and then consciously ignored his advice. My little Hyundai had a piece of gold paper tucked under one wiper. “First Annual Hill-Hell Run,” it read. Unfolding it, I found the disclaimer and had a good laugh. Then I noticed the prize money, and my first thought was that my slow-witted buddy was an exceptionally bad proofreader.

“Oh, no,” he told me. “The amounts are correct.”

We were standing among the other finishers, watching the Sassafras Awards being handed out. Smacking the entry form with a fingertip, I asked, “Do you mean this? Two hundred dollars cash for an age-group winner?”

He shrugged. “I want runners at my starting line.”

“Oh, you’re going to have them,” I said. “And two thousand dollars for winning the whole show?”

He flashed a big smile my way. Maybe I’m remembering it wrong, but something was lurking in those eyes—a sharpness revealed for a half-instant—and then his expression instantly turned back to beach-boy simple.

“Two grand?” I repeated. “With prize money to tenth place?”

Shrugging, Kip pointed out, “There won’t be any double awards, so the wealth’s going to be shared.”

In other words, the top ten finishers, male and female, would be yanked from

age-group consideration. Of course two hundred dollars wouldn't make any difference in my life. But the idea of winning that tidy sum for being the fastest fifty-something ... well, it was a delicious promise. I was still grinning when the Sassafra race director called out Kip's name. Once again, he had won our age-group, and for his achievement, Kip earned the privilege of walking up front to receive a coin-sized medal dangling on the end of a cheap ribbon, plus a gift certificate for fifteen dollars off his next pair of running shoes.

What made the moment memorable was the audience: A sudden silence descended, followed by a few quiet whispers. Then the applause came, but it wasn't the light, polite applause that follows pleasantly contrived moments like these. What I heard was hard clapping accompanied by shouts, one of the young stallions throwing his arms high in the air, calling out, "Kipper! Kip, my man! My buddy! Kip, Kipper!"

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My hip improved, and I started building my mileage again. But old bodies don't relish sudden change or too much ambition. I sputtered in early September, and then managed a brief recovery. But my comeback collapsed during the fifth mile of the Classic 15K. My hip was screaming, and for the first time in thirty years, I gave up, accepting a humiliating ride back to the finish line. The next morning, I saw the first in a series of increasingly expensive doctors, ending up sitting on the end of an exam table while an expert on joint disease—a young woman barely in her thirties—calmly explained what was wrong with me and what she proposed to do about it.

"Titanium," I heard, followed by the words, "You are a lucky man."

"Lucky? How?" I asked.

"Our new hips are quite reliable," she promised. "Under normal conditions, you can expect twenty or thirty years of use. And of course there's always the chance that new materials will come onto the market. Bioceramics. Or perhaps, living hips grown from your own bone tissue."

"I'm fifty-three."

But she didn't understand my point. With a professional grin and minimal charm, she explained, "We don't need to operate in the near-future. Anti-inflammatories and a change of habits should delay surgery for a year, perhaps eighteen months. Depending on your personal tolerances, of course."

"I am fifty-three years old," I repeated.

She blinked. "Pardon—?"

“I’ll never run again,” I blurted. “That’s what you’re telling me. Maybe we’ll be growing hips like corn in another twenty years, but by then, I’ll be in my seventies and desperately out of shape.”

“Oh, but you’ll still be able to ride a bike and swim, and you can use a low-impact exercise machinery, within limits.”

“I know old runners with artificial joints,” I said. “They always try to bike and swim. But they gain weight anyway, and they lose their fitness, and regardless of age, they become fat old people.”

The doctor had no canned answers at the ready. She looked at the bright screen before her, studying an assortment of images of naked bones and a single decaying socket. Then with fingers to her lips, she added, “You know, Don ... other than this one sad hip, you’re in excellent condition for a gentleman of your age....”

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Upon hearing my news, runners had a standard reaction. Surprise and uncamouflaged horror swept across their faces, and probably feeling aches inside their own hips, they would blurt the same reflexive words.

“You’ll be back.”

Their hope was delivered with an identical tone of voice, reflexively optimistic and minimally informed. The only exception was Kip. Watching my limping approach, he pointed out, “You’ve got a hitch in your giddy-up.” And when he heard my plight, he didn’t wince or even touch his own hip. He was immune to my pain, nodding while assuring me, “It could be worse news, of course.”

“Worse how?” I asked.

But that was too obvious to say. Putting on his pretty-boy smile, Kip said, “But then again, who knows what the future holds?”

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I had already entered Kip’s race. But as a rule, I hate standing by, watching runners in action. I’ve always been a creature of motion; at least that’s what my personal mythology claims. And several times, Kip assured me that he didn’t need help. He’d already laid out his course through the forested bluffs, painting the trails with orange arrows and setting up stations at four key points. Runners would search for coolers of water and buckets full of numbered Popsicle sticks. Four sticks had to be retrieved, brought back in order to prove that the full route had been conquered. Everyone would carry a map, and since he’d closed off entries at five

hundred, he still had plenty of time left to make race bibs and see to any other last-minute details.

“So you don’t want my help?” I asked.

The smile was bright and imbecilic. Quietly, he conceded, “I don’t need it. But I suppose you could pull race tags, if too many bodies come in too fast.”

I woke up that morning believing that I’d find something else to do. But after coffee, I was driving north, eventually passing through a tiny river-bottom hamlet where an old brick high school stood empty. A handmade sign had been set up three miles past Enderville. “Hill-Hell Run,” it said, pointing me toward the bluffs. Cars were parked up and down a country road. I had to turn around and take one of the last slots. Limping, I slowly covered a quarter-mile of loose gravel, ending up where an abandoned farmstead stood in a bowl-shaped valley, surrounded on three sides by steep limestone hills and mature forest. By then, the runners had gathered behind a long white line, faces stared at a wall of oaks and ash trees that were turning color after the first cold nights of the season. Every other hand was holding a slip of gold paper—the promised maps. “Good luck to you,” Kip shouted. Then he clapped two boards together, and the youngest runners threw themselves into a desperate sprint, fighting to be first into the towering woods.

When five hundred runners vanish, the silence can be unnerving.

I limped my way over to my friend. He offered me a little wink and one of two folding chairs waiting next to a large digital clock and a second, much shorter strip of white paint.

“The finish line?” I asked.

He nodded, adding, “The finishers come in from there.” He was pointing in the opposite direction from where the pack had gone.

“Have a spare map?”

“On the table,” he said.

A row of shoeboxes was on top of a small folding table, each box empty except for two or three unused race packets. I fished out my own packet and glanced at my bib number—8—then opened the accompanying map. The racecourse was shown as a thin red line lain over the photocopy of a topographic map. Four times, the runner would move out to a distant station, pick up his Popsicle stick and then come back again. The race headed upriver and then came back again, the second leg following a snaking tributary. Then it returned again, taking an entirely different path upriver; and down it came again, the final station waiting on the outskirts of Enderville. The entire course created a long, flattened X.



And what impressed me was how exceptionally complicated every leg looked: I was sitting there, calm and rested. Yet I was having trouble following all the loops and side loops and the dozen or so places where trails crossed one another.

Very quietly, I asked Kip, “What is all this?”

“My course map,” he replied.

The smile hadn’t left his face.

“You’re serious,” I said. And when he didn’t rise to defend himself, I asked, “What did people say about this map?”

“Many words. Not many of them complimentary.”

I could imagine the scene.

“But as I explained it to the runners, there’s plenty of help along the way. I marked the course. Where the trails cross, I put down arrows. Easy to see, very easy to follow.”

“While racing?” I asked.

The smile brightened even more.

“If I was running at full speed,” I said, “charging through the woods, in the shadows, up and down hills ... and then I came to this intersection.... “I pointed at a tangle of lines. “Which way would I go?”

“It depends,” he said.

“On what?”

“Well, you would have to follow the first arrow that I painted.”

I stared at Kip for a long while. From high in the hills, we heard yelling and then an incoherent young voice, male and furious. That’s when I finally asked, “How would I know which arrow was the first arrow?”

Kip didn’t answer.

“Are they different colors? Are they labeled? What?”

But he didn’t seem particularly interested in the topic. Standing up abruptly, he turned. I hadn’t heard any noise, but he must have. To somebody still not visible, he said, “Over here. I’m over here.”

One of his ex-girlfriends emerged from the shadows. Half our age and perfectly fit, she was lovely and she was fuming. With a voice verging on a scream, she reported, “There’s barely a trail up there. Kip? Kip? I thought you had this all figured out.”

To her and to me, he said, “I do.”

“Bullshit,” she told him.

He said nothing.

Then one of the young stallions emerged from the opposite end of the clearing. “Hey, Kipper,” he began, one hand wiping at a ragged cut on his bloody forearm. “People are wandering around everywhere, Kipper. They’re lost, and they’re pissed. It’s a mess up there!”

The race director shrugged his broad shoulders. Then he sat down again, and the two competitors turned back into the trees. A few more curses drifted over us, wandering in from random directions. Finally Kip turned to me, still smiling, saying, “X,” with a soft, careful voice.

“Huh?” I muttered.

“In mathematics,” he told me, “it is the symbol for quantities unknown.”

I offered a weak nod. Nothing more.

“Do you know why?” He winked, explaining, “That great old mathematician, Descartes, wrote *La Gomtrie*. His original manuscript was full of equations using  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  for what is known. While  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  represented mystery numbers. But when the book was being typeset, the printer didn’t have enough of  $y$ s and  $z$ s for all of the equations. So he mostly used the  $x$ , which is where the time-honored convention first began.”

I said, “Huh,” again.

“X,” he said, making crossed line in the grass between his feet. “The symbol is one of the first marks made by any child, if only by accident. And it surely must have been one of the earliest geometric forms drawn by ancient hominids. Don’t you think so?”

“I guess—”

“On a treasure map, doesn’t the X lead us to the pirates’ chest?” Kip glanced at me, asking, “More than anything, what would you like to find? If you had a shovel

and map, I mean. If you could dig deep and uncover any possible wonder...?”

I hesitated. Suddenly I was sitting with a person I didn't know, his language and smart voice taking me by surprise. In vain, I tried to conjure up some worthy response. Or better, I wanted to find some way to ask my friend to explain his sudden, unique transformation.

But there wasn't time. Moments later, half a dozen runners plunged out into the open. They were coming from a third direction—a line of scrawny people bathed in sweat and adrenaline. Judging by their body language, the angriest member had claimed the task of trotting up to Kip. “Will you give us some help here?” he cried out. “This isn't fair.”

Kip took off his smile. Underneath his chair was a gray metal box. He calmly opened it and reached in, removing six twenty-dollar bills. “Fifteen for the entry fee, and five dollars for your gas and trouble. Does that sound fair?”

The runners stopped short. One woman had a deep gash on her knee, while the man in back looked as if he had fallen down an entire hillside. They glanced at each other, measuring moods. Then each took the offered bill and started jogging back to their cars.

Waiting inside that box were twin stacks of new twenties.

Kip had come here knowing exactly what would happen, and he was ready for it. I don't know what startled me more: That this elaborate disaster had been anticipated, or that this man with whom I had run for more than a year had suddenly shown me an interest in, if not a true talent for, mathematics, and perhaps for skills that were even stranger.

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Four hundred and eighty-seven runners had started the race, and remarkably, nearly seventy of them eventually returned to the finish line, each having delivered the necessary four Popsicle sticks marked with their bib number. But even among those finishers, there were controversies and sour looks. The fastest runner in the group—a twenty-three-year-old ex-University star—had gotten profoundly lost. He'd circled Enderville at least twice before stumbling over the last station, and by the time he sprinted home, he won nothing but second place in his age group and sixty-fifth overall.

“This isn't right,” he chanted throughout the awards ceremony.

The first male was a stocky fellow in his middle forties—a self-made expert in tracking and wilderness survival who admitted that he had ignored the various game trails that Kip had used, preferring to follow his instincts overland. The top woman

was his eleven-year-old daughter—a bright beaming girl more thrilled by the silver trophy than by any bland check for a thousand dollars.

From what I could tell, speed had nothing to do with the finishing order.

Luck was what mattered. And persistence. Maturity was also a positive, since the majority of the finishers were my age or older—back-of-the-pack joggers who attacked the course as a morning-long adventure.

One graybeard held a rag to his face, mopping up the blood streaming from a tangle of thorn cuts. “You’re the lucky one,” he told me. “You didn’t have to go up there.”

I was feeling lucky, but only to a point.

“Next year?” asked the male champion. “Is there going to be a Second Annual Hill-Hell Run?”

But Kip never quite replied. He looked at us, his brain probably formulating an empty answer, and then half a hundred voices screamed together, everyone laughing painfully, begging, “No way, please God, no!”

After that, like gas under pressure, everyone dispersed. Kip crammed his gear into the little BMW—everything, that is, but the cooler and buckets of Popsicle sticks—and then he drove me back to my car.

“Thanks for the help, Don,” he told me.

I tried to find encouraging words. But the man didn’t act concerned about how he looked to the world. He was smiling like a maniac, and all I could think of saying was, “Later.”

With a last little wink, he lied to me. “Soon,” he said. And with a little wave and a flash of blond hair, Kip was gone.

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I drove home, leaving my athletic life in storage.

Over those next days and weeks, with my hip aching and the rest of my body feeling ancient, I considered what kind of treasure I’d like to dig up on a tropical beach. A new hip, sure, and maybe a couple new legs too. And then, almost against my will, I discovered that the average day is full of fertile time when you cannot run. What astonished me most was how quickly I grew accustomed to being crippled and how much I looked forward to my doctors’ appointments.

I planned to ride my bike during the November marathon, but it was a cold, raw morning, and I overslept, waking up late and without a hint of regret.

The Monday paper had the usual stories about the race. But the big story, at least for me, was in the Tuesday paper: One of our local runners had felt sick before the marathon, but he ran anyway. He was a big fellow whom I knew by name—one of the top ten finishers at Kip's race. With a terrific bellyache, he managed to chug and walk his way up to the boulevard between the three- and four-mile marks. As it happened, the top cardiac surgeon in the state was standing on his front lawn, sipping green tea while cheering on the competitors, and the foolhardy runner staggered to a halt in front of him and collapsed, stricken with a massive coronary.

If the man had dropped a block earlier or a block later, he would have died.

But the surgeon did everything perfectly, and the runner was in the hospital, but he was going to survive his stupidity. Accompanying the article was a photograph of that very unlikely place where an appointment with death had been missed. Kip's baby mansion was standing in the background. And sitting on the front lawn, plain to see, was a For Sale By Owner sign, over which somebody had painted the single word: sold.

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Kip Logan had moved away and nobody knew just where. But the general assumption, at least among the running community, was that he had been so embarrassed by his fiasco that moving was the least awful solution, followed closely by a tidy suicide.

Except I knew that Kip hadn't been embarrassed. Much less mortified or wracked by any appealing sense of guilt.

The annual track club meeting came in January, and with a sense that this might be the last time, I went to eat pizza and boast about old glories. Everybody seemed pleased to see me, and everybody seemed distracted. At first, I was a little bit hurt by the collective indifference. Few asked about my hip, and no one thought to throw any casual encouragement my way. The subject of the evening was one of Kip's ex-girlfriends. On Christmas, she ate too much and got sick, and when she went to her doctor, a routine test identified that she was suffering from routine food poisoning as well as a profoundly cancerous liver.

A mere week later, a healthy donor liver was found, and the transplant was a complete success.

"She was lucky," said everybody sitting at my table, and presumably everybody at every other table too.

The man on my right asked, “If she hadn’t gotten sick when she did, what would have happened?”

We nodded grimly, knowing her likely fate.

Then without understanding the full significance, I mentioned, “You know, she ran Kip’s race.” Both of his ex-girlfriends had competed, but she wasn’t the angry one. In the end, she had finished as the fifth-place woman, pocketing five hundred dollars and keeping her four Popsicle sticks as a memento. Nodding, I mentioned to everyone in earshot, “This is a funny, strange coincidence.”

Most of them didn’t see my point.

I reminded them about the heart attack on the marathon, and then pointed out, “Two people have had their lives spared. By luck. And both of them happened to have finished the Hill-Hell Run.”

Uneasy laughter turned to paranoid silence.

Then someone up the table named the father-daughter who won the race. And with a sad tone, she added, “I don’t know if you’d call it luck, what happened to them....”

“What happened?” I asked.

The graybeard across from me leaned closer. “His wife, her mom ... she was killed in a big wreck last week. Out on the Interstate.”

A vague memory tugged.

“Their car was crushed between semis,” he told me.

I remembered news footage showing a twisted and mangled Jeep.

Then another voice called out, telling us, “They were there too. He was driving, and his daughter was sitting behind him—”

The room was falling silent.

“Both walked away from the crash. The mom was dead, but they were unharmed. That’s what I heard. Barely a mark on either one of them.”

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It took another four weeks for me to make up my mind. And even then, I was playing games with myself. I drove up north with the intention of poking around

Enderville, talking to the last of the locals and perhaps seeing if I could look at any of the old school records. Did a boy named Kip Logan ever attend that high school? I wanted to find out. Or was the whole business just one elaborate lie, told by somebody I would never see again?

During the drive, all sorts of wild speculations occurred to me. But when I hit Main Street, I realized that I really didn't care if Kip Logan was real. It was still early in the morning. A dusting of fresh snow had fallen on six inches of old stuff. I drove past the empty high school and upriver to the equally empty farmstead, parking as close to the starting line as possible. Then I put on the last pair of running shoes that I'd ever buy, and I fixed a belt around my waist, little bottles full of water and Gatorade. I put on the race bib that had been sitting on the car floor for these last months. That might just matter; who knew? And with a mangled copy of the unreadable map in my hand, I limped my way to the starting line.