

## One Lap Left

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*creative nonfiction by J. W. Kash*

The pain is so intense during the last lap of a track race that there is rarely room for thinking. The master plans and firm resolutions you've calmly repeated to yourself over the weeks or years are incinerated by the writhing fire coursing through your limbs. The intoxicating and ephemeral vanities of medals, records, faster times, beating this person or that person, recognition, and pride are strangled and suffocated out of your mind by your body's desperate plea for breath. The sly demons of self-indulgent justification and easy, endearing excuse claw at your muscles and insinuate themselves in your brain. You're never fully prepared. No amount of intensity in training can emulate the horror and the torture of the last lap. Never in your life have you come closer to the merciless void beneath all things. Never in your life have you felt yourself hurtling so violently down a gaping abyss. You're not the first to admit suicidal yearnings before the last lap begins or a devious desire for a hooded man to jump on the track and break your legs: anything to avoid the encroaching agony.

The best part of you on the last lap is nothing more than a frantic beast fleeing a predator or a starving barbarian hunting his prey. Any intellectualizing or analysis of the last lap will result in hopeless despair or crushing absurdity. There is no good reason for this pain. Why not step off the track and end this madness? Why not slow down and ease this torment?

What is keeping you inside this peripatetic coffin, choking and gasping, burying yourself alive with the unremitting movements of your legs? You don't know. But you're here in the middle of this battlefield with shrapnel piercing your lungs and napalm in your veins. And you suffer.

Yet your consciousness, in the dire drama of the fleeting, competitive moment, is often a poor storyteller. Every seasoned athlete approaching the last lap has awe-inspiring epics beneath their floundering, little, mewling thoughts. You hope these long, lost, lonely expeditions and fierce, raw, and brutal engagements somehow find their way to the surface to contain and direct the roiling, grasping, mental anguish. You hope your time spent in circular prisons, the slashes on the walls marked by the impacts of feet, outweighs the guilt and shame of the times you sat sated and still. You hope the early morning exhaustion followed by heavy thrusting through deep snow, trembling collapses and bitter tears, the freezing winds and numb extremities, the harsh, gritty, scraping inhales, are remembered over the time you neglected your midnight push-up routine and fell asleep face down on the concrete basement floor. You hope the glorious, vast views from carnivorous, conquered hills, the cool showers on scorching skin, the restricted and tasteless diets, the sore and sluggish days, the treadmill gas chambers, the planks of prayer, and the masochistic meditations will be favored in your memory over the times you gave in to the vacuous, undemanding, cheap pleasures of the comfortably-shuffling masses. You hope the private obsessions—the

weeks of carrying a metronome on runs to fix/quicken the stride, the prostrate pouring over of professional athlete biographies, the copying out of elite training regiments, ignoring school teachers while meticulously calculating splits, walking on toes to strengthen the calves, never using elevators, shivering in bathtubs full of ice, and closing your eyes and pumping your arms and visualizing success—were not in vain.

Never forget your injuries. Remember it is better to fail miserably on the track than to sit placid and content on the sidelines. You're here in this interminable inferno, this thrashing whirlwind, this consuming conflagration of physical deterioration because you refuse to sag or slump in the stands. Racing is better than counting the beads of sweat as they steadily drip on the handlebars of a stationary bike. Racing is better than strapping a flotation device to your waist and flailing around in a lukewarm pool. Racing is better than flexing your ankle for hours against the resistance of a rubber cord. Racing is better than stern and warning doctors, sympathetic but uncomprehending friends, and crying beneath a pillow at night.

Never forget the shattering cruelty of your unexplainable defeats. You were eighteen years old. You had been running for two years. Two years is a long time for a fidgeting, compulsive, immature adolescent to focus on one thing. It is a long time to have all decisions revolve around the gradual improvement of a specific task. It is a long time to disregard the superfluous amusements of your peers and stare stoically down a single trail. It is a dangerous and disastrous plan to stake all your hopes and dreams on a fifteen to twenty-minute performance.

But you tried. And you failed. On the last lap your body crumbled, crippled, and cracked. You finished near last place when you planned to finish first. Remember walking wearily home: your constricting throat, your shaking hands, your smeared and stinging vision, stumbling in a ditch, your universe spinning and contracting at the intolerable injustice.

In your bedroom you lock the door. Sobs wrench themselves out of your heaving chest. You rip the pages out of your books. You smash the plaques and awards against the wall. You grip your head and dig your nails into your scalp with a ruthless rage. But you're just an eighteen-year-old who lost a race. Is this a tragedy?

Now you're twenty-two years old. Another four years of unwavering dedication have passed. You have labored and learned. You are smarter and stronger. You are humbled and hopeful. There is no doubt in your mind that you would've become a drunk or a drug addict if you had not found running. Being fast has saved your life. Your most inimitable moments of happiness are the minutes after you run. It is a drug you will abuse until you can no longer move or die. And championship racing is the most stimulating and satisfying of hits.

You approach the last lap of your last indoor race. You crawl through thirty seconds of catastrophe, cross the finish line, and look up at the scoreboard. You have missed a school record by 1.3 seconds. Your college career is over and you have failed in what you set out to do. Of course it does not matter. Of course the difference of 1.3 seconds faster or slower is, in the grand scheme of things, meaningless. But emotions are the unruly, rowdy, riotous cousins of

prudish, serious, well-behaved reason. They don't care about your journey. They don't care what you have gained along the way. They mock and ridicule the straining hand which slipped on a ledge as it attempted to lift your soul to a self-imposed summit.

Inside you are falling. For years you are falling. You are a mature adult now and don't have temper tantrums in your room. You have a mundane, monotonous, milling job and sometimes eat out for dinner. You float through your gray, dreary, dropping life like a piece of driftwood in a stagnant swamp or like a dismal, dingy ghost. The flame inside of you is faintly flickering. The flame is about to extinguish.

Where have all the fanatical frustrations and achievements gone? What happened to your furious, gnawing impatience? You tore your tendons, lacerated your lungs, and mangled your muscles to present the gifts of guts and gore on the awesome altar of putting one foot in front of the other. What have you to show?

Instead of: 15.27 miles, two mid-run shits, tibias still tender, vomit post-run, you have: order nine cases of X, alter Excel spreadsheet, call Todd from I.T., need more staples. Instead of turning the shower as cold as it will go and timing how long you can stand there to increase mental resilience, you hastily scrub beneath a scalding stream because you're late for a staff meeting, then you trip out of the tub and glance in the mirror and loathe the creeping creature you see. Instead of audacious front running, gratifying aches, sit-ups in a quiet hotel room, you have a cramped office, a creaky desk chair, worn-out thoughts, desolate emotions, demolished dreams, and a withering life.

Sometimes, you crave the blackness of oblivion. ...

No.

There is something else you decide to do. You must find a new discipline among this discouraging dirge of devastation.

You sign up for a race. Yes, my friend, you sign up again. It is a different kind of race, one you have never run before, but the essentials are the same.

Four years of training pass.

The fateful day arrives and you step on the line. The gun goes off. The race begins. Everything else fades away.

Relax. Keep in control. You've been here before. You know what to do. The pain is rising. The struggle is daunting. Your thoughts become feverish. Your soul will soon be devoured.

Endurance is something that can't be taught. It is the most difficult thing to learn. The pain never gets easier. Only the capacity to cope becomes easier.

It is always the same: simple exertion against your body's desire for rest and repose—a part of you saying stop, the better part saying no.

You approach the last lap. The bell rings. The crowd roars. Your competitors jostle you on either side. But you do not notice these things. There is only an eternity of track stretching ahead of you before the first curve. You wish you could escape this eternity. You wish you could disappear. You wish you could die.

But in this horrifying hellfire, this ludicrous lashing, this corporeal chaos of self-inflicted suffering, the slaughtered and stricken sinews, the throes and the throbbing, your wicked weaknesses and previous, despicable defeats pulling you down, down, down, the endless execrable excuses, the

inexorable insanity, the all-encompassing absurdity of it all, you must somehow make room for a thought that will rise and soar above the wailing wreckage, a thought that defies all reason, a thought that defies all doubt, a thought that has always been there and will always be there. It is the only thing that has ever mattered.

Go, now, push ...

Run until your heart explodes.