

On your right.

The musings of an Ironman hopeful on a very special birthday gift.

By Mary-Jo Dionne

Some women have to deal with those cumbersome blue Tiffany boxes on their birthdays. You know, the untying of those awkward, jaunty bows. Only to reveal some lifeless piece of bedazzled metal sitting softly on a sheath of cut-from-the-clouds cotton. But not me. Nooooo, my boyfriend is one of those eternal romantics. The last of a dying breed, really. So when it was my turn for the big 3-6, he didn't opt for dial-a-dozen long stems or make a candlelit reservation for some run-of-the-mill swanky seaside dinner. He did what any self-respecting Carey Grant wannabe would.

He sent me to Ironman Boot Camp.

I know. Does it get any sweeter?! (Sorry girls, he's taken.)

If you're unsure how a gift of this nature would make its way into someone's life in the first place, it goes something like this.

Each year, over 2,500 spandex-clad visitors from nearly thirty countries descend onto charming Penticton, BC. Drawn not by the vineyards dotting the desert roads of the Okanagan, this special group is there to do one thing. Well, actually, three things. Swim 3.8kms. Bike 180kms. And run 42.2kms. Otherwise known, when spun into one back-to-back 17-hour effort, as the Ironman – the world's longest single-day endurance event.

Should you ever find yourself in the crowds of the countless spectators Ironman Canada attracts, you may end up doing the unthinkable. Like it or not, people who go to watch Ironman, frequently find themselves signing up to complete the next year's race. And so it was that last year, with a bag of mini-donuts in one hand and a banner cheering on my aforementioned boyfriend in the other, I was one such unsuspecting spectator. After hours of wiping away tears as I was watched the cancer-survivors, the octogenarians,

the plumbers, the teachers, the moms, and the every-man cross the finish line – each in his or her own state of disbelief – before I could say "Give me back my mini-donuts!" the sugary snacks were replaced with a pen and I found myself signing on the dotted line.

In 364 days, I would attempt the Ironman.

It would mean I had one year to learn to swim (far), to bike (super far) and to run (insanely far). It would mean morning training sessions so early that night-before club-hoppers still think it actually is the night before. It would mean that a wild Friday night was simply keeping my eyes open late enough to find out who-did-it on *Law and Order*. It would mean nightmares that star yells of "On your left!" as images of speedy cyclists whip past while I chug up a hill that has no end. And it would mean graciously accepting birthday gifts that came in the form of "Great news! I got you a spot in Shaun Callaghan's Ironman Camp!"

Wow. You shouldn't have. No, *really*. You shouldn't have.

Shaun Callaghan. It's a name that, in British Columbia's Ironman community, conjures images of a guy who knows a thing or three about triathlon. (When you're coaching up-and-coming elites and you yourself are a Kona Ironman World Championship finisher, you know a thing or three. This is, after all, triathlon.) And so it was that camp day arrived. Like a little girl headed for Camp Howdy, I kissed my dog goodbye and promised to write. (After I burrowed my face in his fur, I looked in his innocent terrier eyes and assured him that we would get daddy back one day for this. Maybe we'd send him for a manicure at a salon with big windows on a busy street.)

On a scenic drive from the suburbs of Vancouver to the heart of the Okanagan against a soundtrack of Chaka Khan's *I'm every woman*, I came to the conclusion that I needed to put my fear aside. If not for me, then for the "every woman" Chaka was making me believe I was. *I'm every woman, it's all in meeeeeeee. Anything you want done, baby, I'll do it naturally.* So what if I had to swim, bike, and run more in four days than I had in four years of college combined, under the watchful eye of a ten-time Ironman coach.

Anything he wants done, baby, I'll do it naturally. Armed with Chaka-power, I pulled my car into the lot, and shoved my apprehension in the glove compartment, right next to an old parking ticket, a no-longer-fruity deodorizer, and a pack of stale gum.

If you're anything like me – a relatively grown-up grown-up who hasn't experienced the joy of the frat house since the days of Phi Beta Kappa – the atmosphere was reminiscent of the night-before-exams camp-out. A dozen of us bunked in residences where the comebacks were quick and the friendships fast. An environment where meal sharing, tip-exchanging, iPod-song recommending evolve at the speed of light. Whether your Ironman dream is to qualify for a spot at Kona or simply not to be taken home on a stretcher, if you were at Shaun's camp, the unifying force was that you could say – at the risk of borrowing from a visionary – “I have a dream.”

Swims were about technique. Rides were about nailing race-day nutrition. And runs were about getting through the heat. But no matter the discipline, there was Shaun. Either in the water demonstrating the "Callaghan Crash" an exiting strategy sure to gain you a couple seconds, on the bike offering mental tricks to ward off tears on the last of the horrendous ascents, or on the run pulling up in his navy van – a water station on wheels. I kept waiting to feel intimidated but it stood me up like a bad date. Intimidation was a no-show.

As the weekend went on, and I continued to hear the dreaded "On your left!" as I was passed by campmates who made cycling up mountains look as effortless as being pulled behind a semi by bungee, my expected feelings of wanting to slash their tires were surprisingly absent. Instead, it hit me in one of those waves Oprah has dubbed an "a-ha moment" that it really doesn't matter if you are on the left or the right. All that matters is you are there at all. Whatever the arena, putting down the mini-donuts and daring yourself to do something that feels insurmountable is what counts. Left side, ride side – doesn't matter.

On the drive home, this time it was Beyoncé who had penned lyrics just for me: *I'm a survivor. I'm not going to give up. I'm going to make it.* While admittedly my legs and

arms were sufficiently spent, my lungs weren't and so I sang them out. After all, I had reason to. A new sense of self-confidence, the unshakeable knowing that I am capable of more than I thought, and the shock of realizing I can endure. While there are no guarantees I'll make it to the finish line (from what I hear, there never are), I know I did everything I could to make it to the start line. And knowing all this is a gift that will last a lifetime.

As for my boyfriend, I'm not sure what he's got in store for my big 3-7. But whatever it is, it will no doubt make me swoon. He's just that kind of guy.

Mary-Jo Dionne is a Vancouver-based writer and newbie triathlete.

ink

ThisIsInk.com
