

“A Virgin’s ‘Out There’ Experience Over Fool’s Weekend, 2012”

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Abstract

The Barkley Marathons have long provided virgins with the all too human cycle of loss as perceived by someone in love: unadulterated hope followed by an insurmountable physical and emotional experiment often times ending with failure and despair. This recent Barkley participant argues against the despair element, while fully accepting the preceding elements of the loss cycle. A successful “deflowering” of a Barkley virgin took place Fool’s Weekend including highfalutin goals, moderate anxiety, 16 pages worth reading, a geomagnetic storm (voodoo), a 4-hour “out there” experience, and a mantra with only 50% accuracy.

Race Narrative – “pre-race” (skip ahead if you want)

Barkley Virgin Lesson: Get your maps before the Visitor’s Center closes.

After a minor terror in finding the Frozen Head State Park Visitor’s Center to be closed when we arrived, Naresh and I decided to seek extra maps in camp.

The energy when we arrived was contagious! I recognized veterans from pictures I’d seen or from other ultras I’d run, familiar faces even if I’d never spoken to them: Laz, Matt, Stu, Frozen Ed, and Rich to name a few. After turning over our plates to Laz—Naresh’s a motorcycle plate from India and mine a TN plate saying SURVIVE—we set up camp near Matt Mahoney and someone gave Naresh two extra maps for us to use (maybe John Price? Thank you to whomever!). We met Brett and he seemed...mortal...but how could he do what he does?

Naresh and I had spent hours brainstorming nutrition, pacing, strategies for if one felt better—would one be left behind? Would one of us, as a mother lion perhaps, treat the other as an injured cub? We were both Barkley virgins and consequently accepted that we were very likely to both be left like injured cubs! I’d also begun to reread parts of *Moby Dick* as preparation.

Copying the race map was amazing. Getting to see the route, having read about the legendary climbs like Bad Thing and Big Hell, then tracing them made it all start to feel real. I started thinking of a Barkley bumper sticker that should be: “Travel to Beautiful Frozen Head, See the Tall Mountains, Then Run Straight Up Them”.

I got my pictures taken by a handful of photographers and did some interviews and finally got some chicken and began to connive. I had all my stuff, but just not packed in my race bag. It took over an hour to stop pussyfooting around and start stuffing a ton of food, vitamins, pain and electrolyte pills in my bag for race morning.

Naresh went off to gam with runners at their campsites and I went for veterans around the chicken. The conversations seemed real and important, like I was back in my first 300 level English Lit course, or hearing the homily at my wedding. This, what we were to start tomorrow,

was a *life-event*, not an ultramarathon.

I laid down later for a terrible rest. Every twig, car door, or barking dog sounded like a conch blow. Laz surprised them last year at 12:07am. Would he do it again in the middle of the night? What would happen if I missed it?! Oh, a fitful night!

At about 4:30am, I was up and that was it. I peed, reshuffled my race-bag, put more stuff in, peed again, drank more water, then lay awake in the tent...waiting...

By 7am when everyone was up and milling around, I was overcome with anxiety. What to eat? Should I eat or drink now? What if he doesn't blow the conch until noon? Should I eat?

The mental game was setting in. I ate a PB and honey, drank a drink made to empower the elderly, then drank 24oz. of water, my pre-race tradition. Like an alcoholic, the world around me was unstable and outside of my control, but I could participate in and control my ritual.

At 8:11am on my watch, I was talking with Naresh at his Honda. It looked like two squatters had occupied it the night before. Our stuff was uncategorized and scattered all over the inside. 'We'll never finish five loops with our stuff like that,' I remember thinking.

Then...the conch!

One hour!

Prepare, prepare!

Race Narrative – “in medias res”

With 15 lbs of food, supplies and fluids on my back, I waited for Laz to light the cigarette. It was 9:10am and the race would start in a minute. Around me were legends, virgins, spectators, film crews, innocent children held cautiously back, and a yellow gate. I couldn't hear the obvious creek downhill from us—it too, held its waters as we held our breaths.

The lighter's raised!

The cigarette's lit!

The race's begun!

Heart racing, I hike-jogged up Bird Mountain behind Iso and Carl and some others while watching a small gap form between us and the next group. I felt like a million bucks. That calmed me down a bit, so I started drinking. I felt confidence on the 20% grade. After about a mile, I was joined by Julian and others so we turned on the candy-ass Cumberland Trail for the Pillars of Death.

It was then that I began saying my mantra in my head: “Fun run minimum, fun run minimum, fun run minimum...” I'd say it 3 times. The hope element of the loss cycle had kicked in.

I'll never forget Iso's face when we charged off-trail towards Hiram's Gambit, a look of “well,

here we go, I guess!” Going off-piste through inches of decaying leaves made my heart jump. Weird, but it felt like an important thing to do—charge into the woods...in pursuit of...

I hadn't seen Naresh in a while and was worried. I did see a group further downhill, though.

The Gambit was fast. I almost lost Iso and Carl in the pines but we came out not 10 yards East from **Book 1** (*Where There's a Will*). We'd made it in less than 45mins. We grabbed our pages, then our packs, but I paused and wanted a picture.

Barkley Virgin Lesson: Stop running to take a picture and reality will set in.

I looked up and was alone and it had only taken me a few seconds to snap a shot! No more “trail race”—it was now time for a personal challenge.

I checked the race directions, took a bearing, and headed East across the coal shelf to find the drop-in point for Jacque Mate Hill. Ah, a flat spot, a calm before the storm. A group of runners passed me looking for the book. Then, I heard some voices behind me in the pines also talking about the drop-in. Turns out it was Zane, Hiram, DeWayne, Dusty and others. I didn't know how important this group would become at this point—we'd end up doing most of Loop One together! I joined because I'd been passed by DeWayne in many an ultra and knew Zane was a strong runner, so was jazzed to be on pace with them.

Barkley Virgin Lesson: Run your own damn race. You'll most likely get scraped at some point. Then, you're on your own.

This didn't happen yet, but it eventually would and I'd slow to nearly a crawl.

Descending Jacque Mate's steep grade was amazing. 45% down. The number didn't make sense but the reality of the grade was almost dangerous: one step out and you'd go down 4-5 feet. We joked about Loop Three and coming up it they way you joke at a funeral for comfort.

The pace evened out and I was with Zane and DeWayne, hopping barbed-wire and rocks, sliding ever closer to the park boundary. DeWayne pulled ahead once we saw the boundary markers and made it to **Book 2** (*Oh, No! We're Gonna Die*) a minute or two before I did. I was right on track and came out only about 50 feet from the cairn hiding the book. Boom, I thought.

Everyone regrouped at the bottom and started the long hike up to Jury Ridge at a good clip, Hiram leading the way. I was amazed at his relentless forward progress, a way I move as well. Zane and I pulled ahead near Bald Knob and made it to SOB Ditch quickly. I took a good picture of Zane crossing it and laughed as I never thought I'd ever be there. I WAS THERE! This was real! Strangely, my legs felt nothing, only my back was aching from the pack. I'd been eating, but not keeping track. I'd put in something like 800 calories almost 3 hours in.

Once Zane and I entered the Coal Ponds, Nick came out of nowhere, startling us! The Quiet Ascender! No sounds came from his shoes as he blazed past! He looked incredibly calm and strong—he'd taken an incorrect bearing at the coal shelf and spent a long time looking for Book

2, he said.

I slowed on the switchbacks and made it to **Book 3 (*Darkness at Noon*)** and the water drop just as Zane, DeWayne and Julian and some others were heading out for Stallion Mountain. I again had stopped for pictures and found myself alone.

Up the ridge at Cold Gap, then a bearing. I chose the correct jeep road and climbed towards Stallion, stopping to pee. Hiram, Tim, Dusty, and Tom were coming from the water drop so I joined up with them for the trek through Stallion. It was steep at times but landmarks were easy to find and we all felt good. I felt really fresh, but was too timid to go ahead at this point, having just entered the second “off trail” portion and wanting to stay in the race.

Barkley Virgin Lesson: Go when you feel good.

You will not always feel good. Laz will always tell you to push yourself.
Why finish a race with gas in the tank? Did you learn about your abilities?

Book 4 (*The Idiot*) was an easy find, and the marshes in the daytime were not difficult to navigate as there was a distinguishable trampling of marsh grass and we kept our eyes on the peaks on the horizon. Soon, tracking would fail us on Zipline, but for now we got to the junction under Fyke’s Peak easily along a similar path from previous runners. I didn’t recall seeing an inverted cone, however...something that would come to bite me much later...

During the descent of Fyke’s Folly, we initiated the 3-Person Decending Cycle of Doom. The leader, let’s call him ‘captain’, would identify a hindrance, say a downed tree or slick rock. The second, let’s call him ‘stoker’, would say “okay, got it” and avoid the hindrance. The poor third bastard, let’s call him ‘poor bastard’, would say “huh?” and fully experience the hazard and usually end up horizontal.

Captain: “Wow, that’s a slick rock with briars!”

Stoker: “Thanks, man”

Poor bastard: “Ouch! Wait a minute!”

We found the New River, crossed it in front of a cameraman’s lens, then located **Book 5 (*The Thorn Birds*)** at the marsh. We turned to hike Testicle Spectacle. No emotions. It actually did not seem as steep as its legend, until the top! Its grade is definitely an average, with the bottom 2/3 being simple and top 1/3 being nearly impassible! What made it all the more difficult was that the speed of the group was the max speed of the most exhausted person. We hadn’t planned well on who went when. I found myself at the back, waiting precariously on a little ledge or midway up a sludgy-briary slide with nothing really to hold onto except more briars. At the top, though, it was dry and easier to ascend past the cameraman who was, I’m sure, glad to be sitting.

Meth-Lab Hill was a breeze and we’d made it quickly to Raw Dog Falls by trotting around the hill dead-on to where we were supposed to be. **Book 6 (*Living Through Personal Crisis*)** was a resting point to get some food before heading for Danger Dave’s and eventually Pig Head Creek.

Tim and I decided to climb Danger Dave's despite the heckling from the film crew. Near the top, he began to lose footing, so I pushed him up as he was pulling on a baby rhododendron—the only thing keeping the both of us from sliding to the beginning of the climb! At the top, the rest of our group was waiting for us, and it was then we realized that accomplishing something like Danger Dave's would cost us a little triumph later, but we didn't know what. Doing Danger Dave's went against my principle of "small changes give big results", but small efforts and small changes at the Barkley lead to *no* results at all.

At this point, we'd been averaging 50mins per book. We'd been set free into the woods, like the Nantucketers Melville described who would set to sea "like so many Alexanders". Our sea was one of thorns, our waves ones of fatigue, but with each calm a new resolve would form. Here I was going into the (mostly) unknown! Conquering! Progress! One Loop was definitely to be achieved! Strength from within! Send *me* in the whaling boat (map)—spear (compass) in hand!

Then, we got to Pig Head Creek. Terrible. The first step was up 5 feet. It felt well over 30% for the beginning section, but I knew from the charts it should be short. How can it hurt so badly and be so short? What had started to go wrong inside me? It seemed like two miles of death, up. The physical element of the loss cycle had fully kicked in. Hiram said the race has just begun.

The only respite was the PMT and the few minutes of going sideways and not up. Thank you, Laz, for that! Tim took my picture in front of 7 Mine and I got some food and drink in before the climb to Rat Jaw.

Immediately we were met with runners coming down, Aaron, Zane, Julian, DeWayne and some others. They were flying! It looked effortless to descend nearly 40% grades! I kept that in mind while trying to ascend...I took each section one at a time, trying not to pause but keep going up.

I used every bit of downed powerline to get up Rat Jaw, including one I grabbed and relied on, only to find 15' later it was affixed to the hill only by a tangle of briars! Such was their grasp!

Hiram and I were subjected to a fit of heckling from the Fire Tower at the top and it felt strange to be asked to call out my number and name. Was this any other ultra? Was I to enter this aid station like others and call out to a faceless voice at the top of a hill? I was too tired to look up. The ultra gods had become sarcastic teenagers, flinging words like daggers.

"Hey, what's your name and number?" and with no response, they'd continue, "I'm here to be sure you're still sane!"

"Yeah, come on! Name and number?!"

We were like prisoners of Rat Jaw, a mere mile above the real prison, and they were lookers-see extracting humiliation. Our foolish choice to climb all the way up, just to climb all the way down had led us here. Maybe I was no longer Alexander, but Sisyphus without his stone.

At the top, Dusty looked done but recovered well. The water was cold and refreshing. It was just under 7 hours into the race, us still averaging less than an hour per book. Our group had thinned to me, Hiram, Dusty and Tim, who had begun to feel the effects of heat exhaustion. But,

we picked up Marco who was suffering. He complained of blisters; God help him he continued.

We got our pages from **Book 7 (*Up the Down Staircase*)**. Some gave hugs, some went up the tower. I can't remember what I did. I think I just stood there. An infantile coping mechanism.

It was to that point in the Barkley when some begin to question whether they had gotten the pages or not a few minutes down trail. Fatigue was mental now, not just physical. The emotional element of the loss cycle was kicking in.

Also, since I didn't see him while descending Rat Jaw, I knew Naresh was way behind and I began to worry—I knew he wanted a strong effort and had it in him. Our races had diverged. We'd have to wait until camp to get stories—both in the same race but such utterly different ones! I almost couldn't wait to hear what he was, had been, will have had been experiencing!

We'd begun to imagine how Brett had conquered something—creating our own mythology. “Did you hear Brett rode a real rat down Rat Jaw?” or “I heard he rode a unicorn up Pig Head!” This got us through, as myths got our ancestors through unspeakable trials.

There was Brushy Mountain prison at the bottom of Rat Jaw, almost 40% negative grade. Surreal. I took a picture. The picture, like most, is terrible. What should be the center is usually in a corner or appears unimportant, when it was the most important thing in my life at that moment. How do you capture momentary importance? I'd begun to lose focus, but my mantra was still there, “Fun run minimum”. We descended through high grass and weeds to the ancient stone wall. Down an old sidewalk, then we found the entrance to the tunnel.

“This is runnable, guys,” I said as we ran along the outer wall of the prison. Down into the tunnel, no problems. Again, “this looks runnable!” when we were inside making our way in the near-dark.

It was unbelievable! I was under a prison where so many spent so long! Running! Hiram and others rode the little ridge in the middle, but my shoes were waterproof, so I saved caring and just sloshed along. Dusty snapped a pic of me. We sang prisoner songs, old hymns, talked about *Spaceballs*, you know, what anyone would do under a prison.

At the end, everyone went up the vent shaft and Tim pulled me out like the birth of a baby gazelle! It was caught on film. I remember thinking, ‘wow.’ It was payback for helping him up Danger Dave's. **Book 8 (*Human Zoo*)** was right there by the NW wall. Got our pages and got a snack in and took a deep breath for what was next. The Bad Thing.

We took a bearing and headed up Bad Thing, hitting Razor Ridge and just going up and up! It seemed to never end! This is where flies became a factor. They stayed with me until Chimney Top on Loop One. More hecklers, the flies. More chiding of my decisions. Flies. I thanked God they were not biting flies and moved on and up, hitting the capstones of Indian Knob in a pretty short amount of time. Tim was feeling sick, Dusty was giving all she had up the ridge and Hiram's never ceasing forward march kept him looking strong despite real fatigue.

I was at the center of what seemed to be three capstones, so a little trek West got to the correct one and I threaded the Needle's Eye to find Julian resting on a stone by **Book 9 (*Sweet Suffering*)**. He looked rough and confirmed so. He took off down Zipline, me a minute later.

Barkley Virgin Lesson: Don't just follow tracks, follow directions.

I followed some tracks that led in the right direction but ended in some pretty sketchy spots, and we all caught each other in minutes. Again, more tracks, wrong line! We'd have to back-track or side-track for too long!

When tracks went even slightly off our bearing, we caught ourselves following them by instinct and had to rethink, spend precious time and energy. Waste! At the bottom, we found the creek and **Book 10 (*Remind Me Who I Am, Again?*)**. Everyone took a rest and before the next test...

Big Hell, appropriately named. Some 100', 1000', 10,000', it didn't matter anymore. I remember Hiram guessing it would take 45 minutes. I decided right there that I wanted a Fun Run for real. I needed to move and now. I went up the steepest ridge I could find and it hurt but I kept going. It was so steep that you couldn't tell the difference between footsteps and where gravity would pull the decaying leaves down in clumps. This was a test – could I make it through another Loop? Could I ascend? Some 34 grueling minutes later I was staring at **Book 11 (*Is This Your Day?*)** and I couldn't believe it. I even felt good! I'd passed Julian halfway up and couldn't see him at the top. It was starting to get dark and I wanted to be back at camp.

It felt good to run down Chimney Top and I did so all the way to Rough Ridge. Only 400' and it killed me! I slowed to a hike and made it across just as it got too dark to see. With my headlamp now on, I hit the top of Rough Ridge, then ran all the way back to the bridge to the campsite.

It took many hours to go around once, and there I was reentering camp after dark—what an amazing feeling! I've finished many ultras, cried at some, but this reentry into camp wasn't a finish. It seemed more important, too important for emotion now. I was only partially finished. There was work, real work, to be done still. People clapped, no hecklers here.

Someone walked by going the other way. They were merely going to the bathhouse probably for a shower before going to bed, like they always do when they camp with their family.

There it all was in one moment: the Barkley crowd and the regular campers. Barkley, a microcosm even of the ultra world (a microcosm in and of itself), and then just the rest of the world doing its rest-of-the-world thing like brushing teeth or showering before bed.

I passed, saw the yellow gate glowing in my headlamp and trucked up and tapped it. 11:28 and change. Laz wrote the times and noted that I had only a little bit to get out if I was planning on the 12-hour cutoff. I said it looks like that's out of the question, now, and headed off towards our campsite for supplies. I felt great! I had so much energy and my legs and feet felt fine! I called home, said I was okay and going back out, then got to work prepping for Loop Two.

Barkley Virgin Lesson: Don't mess around in camp. Get in, get out.

You've heard the "beware the chair" saying at ultras. Beware all your stuff.

I took almost an hour to repack my bag, eat a ton of food, shower off the blood from my arms and legs, change socks and put on tights. I'd thought ahead and had heavy-duty tights made that fit me so I could blast through briars at night and not undergo a total bloodletting. I got all that on, refilled my bag, then heard Dusty call out that she and Hiram were about to set out on Loop Two in a bit. I again wrestled with the decision of stay or go—play it safe or go to my abilities?

I played it safe and figured they'd help through Book 2 and Jacque Mate again, so I decided to wait another 15mins until they were ready to go. They were planning on making it to Phillips Creek at least, then reassessing from there. I still had my mantra in my head, "Fun run minimum", but realized if I didn't pull away at some point and do it relatively soon, the reality of a Fun Run wouldn't come. All this dawdling would be paid back to me by Fate in a few hours...

We headed out some 12:43 into the race and went up Bird Mountain with little incident. At the top was Michael (ND) who had gotten away from Frozen Ed and gone ahead. He'd done so at camp, he said. Said he had a beer in camp, too. Dang. He joined. We made terrible time to **Book 1**, somehow taking forever through such a small section. Getting to **Book 2** was the same—we were about 2 hours behind our daytime pace. A Fun Run now a pipe dream?

...but, at the stone cairn at Phillips Creek we met up with Frozen Ed and Julian and Marco and they were pushing on! Marco's feet were trashed, so groups traded me for him and I went on up towards Jury Ridge with Frozen Ed and Julian, who had recovered significantly in camp. A few minutes into the climb, Julian gave me the biggest confidence boost, saying I looked strong and if I wanted it, I better go now...

So, I listened, and I did. I was ready to accept the *Barkley Virgin Lesson* from before. Taking off up Jury Ridge in a semi-trot, soon their headlamps were no longer visible. I made Jury Ridge and ran all the downhill, passed Bald Knob and passed SOB Ditch pretty quickly.

Like a jazz musician hearing the notes of his solo in his head a moment before he plays them, I could see the trail in my mind before it was illuminated by my headlamp. I was on! I was making great time! I'd only ever seen this stuff *once* before! I had my lamp on low so I could retain as much peripheral vision as possible—no surprises. I wanted to find those coal ponds...

I hit all landmarks dead-on, passing the ponds and the switchbacks up to Cold Gap quickly. I have no idea what exact time it was at the Garden Spot, but it took me less time at night to run the North Boundary section than it did during the day. I felt great! **Book 3** was easy to find in the dark. Back down hill for a bit at full speed!

Water jugs, boom. Tiny trail towards Stallion, boom. **Book 4** at the summit of the mountain, boom. I checked my watch and it was exactly 18:00 into the race. That meant it was around 3:12am. Peering into the dark atop Yellow Indian to find Fyke's Peak was going to be pointless.

Fate was about to spin her wheel. She'd spun it favorably on Loop One. Things soon changed.

Not 1 min into the marshes I stopped to take a bearing. The gods were playing a cruel joke, or there was a geomagnetic storm JUST on the top of Stallion, or a voodoo doll with my resemblance was spun on the table all damp with jug water and dew by the hecklers at the top of Rat Jaw...I watched as my compass slowly made a continuous movement through all 360 degrees, clockwise, twice.

I turned my body and tilted it on a different plane. No difference. I watched the needle eerily teeter for a moment with the shift in position, then resume its clockwise march around the rose.

I looked up and before me was nothing but marsh grass, thorns, and a faint path in the dew. The path was littered with scat, all kinds. Deer and wildcat tracks were easily visible in the mud. Maybe wild pig too—some of the scat was unfamiliar to me. I needed to get out of this place.

Some 30 minutes later I'd made the junction to Fyke's Peak after many retries and bouts of the willies. I was walking now. Not a race-walk. Just an out-in-the-middle-of-the-night-for-giggles walk. I figured Fyke's would be easy to find. I mean, it's summit is easy to identify, right?

My compass was working again and said I was traveling SSE at the junction to Fyke's, so I took it. Then, the road curved, and kept curving, and kept going and going...too far, I thought, so I backtracked to the fire ring. I took the road slightly downhill from my previous one. Nope, not even wild animal tracks on this one. Back to the high road. High seemed right—I was to find a summit...why was I even questioning that? Argh! Mind games! Argh! Laz!

After 30 minutes I returned to the junction to take another bearing, thinking maybe Frozen Ed and Julian and Micheal would be coming by. I peed, ate, drank, and read the directions again for the umpteenth time. It should be right up there, just a few hundred paces! It should be to the SE from where I was! I should already be past the next book and be at the Testicle Spectacle!

Little did I know I was only 1 hour into a 4 hour "out there" experience.

I needed to act, not think. I acted and found what I believed to be the SE most projection of the mountain/ridge. I took it.

It was a mistake. A dreadful one. All briars, angry ones. Also, 5-8 foot drops left and right the whole way. I crossed what seemed to be 5 old jeep roads and still no park boundary. Tons of unearthed coal, like the blood of the mountain laid bare to clot on the surface. I feared I was heading too far East and would be outside the map, so I headed due South. I found some boundary to my left after another half an hour of sliding down ledges and slipping under briar bushes. Once I rode a briar bush some 30 feet down the mountain by accident. Lucky shorts, I thought, or it's my parasympathetic nervous reaction kicking in...

I could hear water and it was getting louder. I crawled down the sides of two different waterfalls 6-8 feet in height, and neither was familiar. I began to head SW towards what I thought was a draw, only to find it another old jeep road. I knew I needed to go SW at the boundary I'd passed, so continued that way towards water, expecting to come out at the power lines and New River.

Well, I came out at the New River, but didn't know for another hour just where. It had taken me nearly 1 hour to descend what I thought was Fyke's Folly, something that took 25 minutes in Loop One. Mental games were affecting physical games. I was getting tired. It was 21:00 into the race, three hours after the fourth book. I needed to find where I was!

The map said the road was up the ridge, so I climbed up on the S side of the river. Nothing after even 200 feet. Nothing upstream either. Downstream seemed to be getting faster, so that didn't seem right. Where the hell was I?

Eventually, after nearly 4 total hours of being lost "out there" between the books, it started getting light. It was a little before 7am at this point and I could see the sky lightening downstream—boom—I KNEW WHERE I WAS! Thank you Boy Scouts, fear, Laz's map...

I had come out a complete cove to the West. I was at the headwaters of the New River upstream from the confluence. Unfortunately, it was all briars and a laurel hell between where I was and the old power lines. I finally reached them after running through or alongside the stream for what seemed like forever. I was back! I knew where I was! Was I back in the race?!

Unfortunately, no, this meant my race was over. It was 22:00 into the race and I still had the hardest 6 books to go at the bottom of Testicle. At **Book 5**, I had to make the choice how to get back to camp. My race was over. No Fun Run. No Loop Two in time. My mind was gone and my body was beginning to shut down—it knew it was over and no longer had to focus. I stuffed my 16th page into my bag and accepted that my mantra was 50% correct—1/2 a Fun Run.

There was only *one* choice: climb Testicle Spectacle again as payment, in blood, for my transgressions.

The pain was glorious. Each footprint in the mud was filled with water from dew and from tiny rivulets that had formed over night. My feet kept slipping. Each step ended in just a half-step or quarter-step with the same effort. It was hell. It was a sticky, briar hell. It seemed steeper this time. It was the way. I laugh when I'm nervous. I laughed so hard, then, I snorted and cried.

Was I Dante climbing through Purgatory? I had abandoned all hope before descending Fyke's. Is that when I really went on my true journey? The Armes Gap jeep road was the only way to paradise. Well...that, plus another three miles on South Old Mac...

Barkley Virgin Lesson: Even when you run out of time, it will still probably be 6 miles back to camp.

I found Byron on Armes Gap and he confirmed the path to take home. He was done too, legs having given out on Loop One. Even the 10% jeep road grade seemed too much now. I got to Tub Springs and wanted to curl up in the springhouse. It looked cool. The bottoms of my feet had begun to boil with the hard descending and slipping on Spectacle.

I began to recall Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. Why hadn't that occurred to me

before? Oh yeah, I'd felt weightless on most every climb while my mind was in it. I'd felt powerful. Now, I recalled an early sequence in the book, "To carry something was to hump it... In its intransitive form, to hump meant to walk, or to march, but it implied burdens far beyond the intransitive" (O'Brien, 5). I carried a real burden, now.

Some Boy Scouts shouted at me, wanting to know if I was "one of the racers". Hecklers, I thought. Teenagers, again. I am an Eagle Scout, was I a heckler? Flies. Just moths in my headlamp. Headlamp. Why was I still wearing my headlamp? It was almost 9am.

I thanked God that South Old Mac was downhill. A kind elderly couple passed me on the path to the trailheads. Dusty and Marco saw me jogging to the bridge to camp.

"Did you do it? Are you finishing it?" they asked, enthusiastically. As they should have, I'd been "out there" long enough for Loop Two for sure. "Lost for four hours," I remember saying.

The jog to the gate was okay. The claps again. Laz was there again, that warmed my heart—I shook my head and said I only got 5 books and it took me 4 hours to get to book 5. I realize that doesn't sound bad at all and rephrase. I clarify: 4 hours between books 4 and 5!

That gets some recognition from the crowd. I'd been out there long enough to run out of time.

"Next year," I begin to think.

I am excited that I got to experience a night loop and to have been "out there" in many ways. I know now my capabilities and they are greater than I had expected. It was only when I rose to a challenge beyond myself that I was the challenge rose slightly beyond my current capabilities. Laz created a game specifically designed for each player, a "choose-your-own-adventure" novel.

The 2012 Barkley Marathons was my first DNF. I've always said I wanted mine to be the Barkley. That was one goal I achieved Fool's Weekend. Now I'm no longer a virgin. Not yet a veteran.

Now, I have my own tale. I've done something that feels important. Next year, I will do something more important.