New Nonfiction by Matt Eidson: Binge

The trails in Coopers Rock State Park range from wide and flat to narrow and steep. My eyes scan the path just in front of me to make sure the ground is clear of any tripping hazards. I'm four laps into a five-lap race, a 50k put on by the Robin Ames Foundation. And as it stands right now, I'm not just winning the race, I'm on pace to break the course record.

It's late October, a beautiful time to be outside in West Virginia. Massive moss-covered boulders surround the winding dirt path. The trees are somewhere between green and brown and yellow and red. Fog lingers, reflecting the sunlight and keeping the air cool and thick. I almost never look around and enjoy scenes like this when I'm racing because my mind is totally committed to the task at hand. Have I eaten enough calories this hour? Should I stop and change into dry socks? Have I been drinking enough electrolytes and water? Am I maintaining my pace? There are so many things to consider that by the time I think to look beyond the two or three feet in front of me, I've run another five miles.

The fact that I hardly ever stop to admire the scenery makes me wonder why I'm so drawn to long runs in pretty areas. I've spent hundreds of dollars registering for races across the country—races in National Parks, races along massive rivers, races that loop around mountains. For the most part, I don't remember any of the scenery because I was too busy looking at the ground right in front of me.

I've heard other ultrarunners talk about how grateful they are that their bodies can do things like this—propel them along beautiful trails through remarkable scenery. I sometimes hear

them chatting with each other after the race, talking about views they stopped to photograph with their phones. They show off the photos and describe an overwhelming sense of clarity found on the trail—one that brought them to laughter, and then tears, all in a matter of minutes. I can understand feeling grateful for the opportunity to exist in these beautiful areas, even if I don't stop to take photos of the scenery. But I'm not sure I've ever felt *grateful* for my body.

I've always been critical of it, though.

Every ounce of fat and every acne scar and duck-footed step is logged in my mind. My critiquing of my body is constant, but it does die down a bit when I'm out on the trail. Again, probably because I'm too busy looking at the path in front of me.

In Coopers Rock State Park, I bound from spot to spot on the way down a massive hill, taking care to avoid the rocks and roots trying to trip me. I reach the bottom of the incline and suddenly I'm running on a flat piece of trail next to a creek. I let myself look up and admire the woods around me. It's taken me a really, really long time, but I think I'm finally starting to see what all those other runners are talking about.

It all started at the dinner table when I was nine years old. My mom,dad, and sister had just finished dinner. My parents told my sister to go play. They told me to stay.

We need to talk to you, they said. They sat side-by-side and put their arms on the table and cupped their hands together in unison.

Your dad isn't your real dad, my mom told me.

My dad, "Ron" now, kept his eyes down. I looked down at the

floor too. I don't remember why, exactly. I might have felt ashamed. I might also have wanted to mirror Ron, as if to say "No, you're wrong, he's definitely my dad, look at how we're both looking at the floor at the same time."

Ron would like to adopt you so you could have his last name, my mom said. I looked up to see my mom staring straight at me. Ron was still staring at the floor.

I thought "Eidson" was my last name already.

Would you like that? Would you like it if Ron adopted you and gave you his last name?

I picked at the bits of food still on my plate and took them up on the offer. It was the only name I'd ever known, after all. Somewhere in my little brain, "food" and "comfort" latched onto one another gently. Over the years the bond would grow stronger, more entrenched. There would come a time when I wouldn't be able to distinguish between physical hunger and emotional hunger. There would come a time when I'd have to stop and listen to hear if my stomach was growling, so I could determine whether or not I *needed* that extra slice of pizza.

The evolution didn't happen overnight. It was slow and subtle. An extra cookie here, another plateful there. My body grew taller and wider. At nine years old I was skinny—a string bean, a noodle. By the time I got to Junior High, I was obese.

The 50k race is a 10k-distance loop repeated five times. Each loop is roughly 6.2 miles and has about 687 feet of elevation gain. The main climb, the last few miles before you reach the start/finish line, has an average grade of 3.4 percent and 429 feet of gain. After completing four loops, my body is screaming at me. *One more lap*, I tell it. *Suck it up, we got this*. I look down at the path and focus and get to work.

The first few miles of the loop follow a well-maintained trail that runs alongside the main road into the park. I pass a couple aid stations where friendly volunteers offer high-fives and water and snacks, like bananas and oranges. They recognize me by now and yell out encouragement: *keep it up* and *you're CRUSHING it* and *great job man*. Eventually the course hangs a hard left and starts a slight decline deeper into the park. The trail seems to never let you fully embrace a long incline or decline; it wavers back and forth mile after mile. At least it's a well-marked path, which isn't *rare* exactly, but it's not a given.

During my first 50k, in Minnesota, one other runner and I found ourselves ahead of the pack, but due to a bad trail marking, we ended up running two miles in the wrong direction. We went from first and second to seventh and eighth. When we realized the mistake, we had opposite reactions. He slowed down, changing from the "I could win this thing" mindset to the "just finishing would be cool" mindset. I got pissed off and knuckled down. I pushed my body, keeping my eyes on the trail just ahead of me, ignoring the aid stations and refusing to eat for the entire 33-or-so miles of the race, and only stopping for water once or twice. I ended up in third place. For the next two weeks, I could barely walk, let alone run.

When you do the math and drop the two extra miles I ran, I could have taken first. I think about that often. Not for egotistical reasons though. I think about it because on that Minnesota run, for the first time, I realized my body was more than a decoration for praise and admiration. It was also capable of doing incredible things. Years later, running in Coopers Rock and about to take first, I don't mind the mistake I made years ago. I embrace it; it lit a fire in me.

I first shoved my index finger down my throat when I was a teenager. This was after my best friend, Jake, joined the

wrestling team and lost a bunch of weight. Before he got rid of his love handles and gut and the extra-puffy skin below his jawline, we used to joke about our fatness. We owned it. We were fat, sure, but we were funnier than all the fit boys. That was why they kept us around, because we were so funny. Or Jake was funny, anyway. And I was Jake's best friend. So, I could hang around too.

We still played football like all the other boys in our tiny hometown. Most of the kids seemed to love it. To me though, it felt like a requirement. In my mind, Jake and I stood just outside the typical high school experience. We accepted that things like sex and love were not afforded to us in our small town. We were the jesters, the comedic relief. We were the chubby, goofy, acne-scared teenagers who made the fit and smart boys laugh alongside their girlfriends. We couldn't earn attention with our bodies, so we did it with our jokes.

In college we would shine, though. That's how I imagined it, anyway. But then Jake and I got busy and didn't talk to each other for a few months. The next time I saw him, he was skinny and dating a beautiful girl from one town over. I was still fat and alone.

Soon after I saw Jake's skinny body, I binged more food more quickly than I ever had before (and I'd binged plenty of times). I snuck upstairs, went into the pantry, and took two of everything—Pop Tarts and Chewy Granola Bars and Ding Dongs and Little Debbie Brownies and those sugary little cakes in the shape of Christmas trees. I washed down thousands of calories with Dr. Pepper and pinched the fat rolls on my stomach harder with every bite, imagining a smaller body. I was a nice kid, I reasoned. A good kid. I didn't have the best grades, and I wasn't good at football, and I didn't enjoy hunting or working on cars. But I didn't deserve this body, this appendage latched to a brain that only had space for movies and pop punk music.

I don’t know if I cried in my room that night. But I do know that something in me snapped. I snuck back upstairs and locked the bathroom door behind me. Kneeling in front of the toilet in my boxers, I shoved my finger into my mouth. My fingernail scraped the back of my throat, drawing blood. The muscles in my throat lurched and throbbed and tried to push my finger away. I didn’t budge. My stomach turned over and promised me it would rid itself of the garbage inside. I pulled my finger out just as thousands of calories launched into the toilet. I cried and puked, snot pouring from my nose. I emptied my stomach until hot, black stomach bile had thoroughly acid-washed my tastebuds. I flushed the toilet and wiped my face. For probably the first time in my life, I felt I was in control.

Months passed and I ate only what I needed to survive. Like Jake, I joined the wrestling team. Each practice started with a 30-minute run. I would shuffle up and down the hallways leading to the high school gymnasium, bent over and sweaty and breathing heavy, while all the skinny fit boys flew by me, their backs straight while they talked and laughed with each other. I learned not to make eye contact. Something about the lack of effort or concern in their eyes rubbed me the wrong way. I’d keep my head down and keep my eyes to the ground.

I wasn’t good at wrestling, but I was good at losing weight. And losing matches. Still, I found that losing weight brought me things I’d never had much of before: attention, compliments, praise. The smaller my body got, the more people could see me.

I became addicted.

More months passed and the number on the scale crept lower. I started at 240 pounds and gradually dropped to 215. Then 200. Then 190. Eventually I was wrestling and losing matches at 189. By the time the season ended, I was as skinny as I’d ever been. And I had a real girlfriend for the first time. I still

didn’t love running, but I understood it as a thing to give me the body and praise I craved. I could keep up with the skinny boys during our 30-minute run. I could even beat them sometimes. I learned that if I starved myself until an hour or so before practice, I’d have just enough energy to run with the fit kids.

Running wasn’t just a way to earn attention with a smaller body, it was a way to earn attention through action. Plus, I didn’t have to try to be funny all the time.

Years later, I decided to kick off the 50k in the Coopers Rock State Park differently than any race I’d ever run. On a fun little trail race a month before—the Run Wild 20-Miler in Barboursville, West Virginia—I figured out that a strength of mine was maintaining a consistent and quick pace for long periods, no matter how tired or worn out I felt. For the Coopers Rock 50k, my plan was to push as hard as I could for the first half lap and then settle into a steady pace, the idea being that I’d destroy any chance the other runners might have in overtaking me.

I took off faster than usual. But there was a wrinkle in the plan right away—someone else seemed to have the same goal.

I took off at a fast-for-me clip of 7:20-7:30 pace per mile, hoping I’d be propelled right to the front. Instead, I found myself in the dust of a young woman who was easily running 6:50-7:00 PPM. She was *booking* it. Seeing my chance at finally winning a race slip through my fingers, I quickly considered my options.

Her pace—my pace, even—was not sustainable for a 50k. Not unless you’re an elite runner with sponsors. The chances were good that she’d have to slow down eventually. And while I couldn’t match her pace on flat ground, I knew I could at least keep her in eyesight. Then, when we hit an incline, I’d

break out another ability I discovered at the Run Wild 20-Miler—I'd run, not hike, the inclines.

Most runners choose to conserve their energy and start hiking when the grade shoots up. I figured out that I could overtake a lot of runners by fighting that urge. No matter how worn out I was when I reached the top, I could will myself to keep running.

When we hit the first incline in Coopers Rock, I made my move and sped up when the young woman began hiking. I overtook her. I ran all the way to the top and then kept running. I'd pulled it off. I had a little celebration in my head and then settled back into my 7:20-7:30 PPM. But I couldn't enjoy the victory for long. The next thing I knew, the young woman was right on my tail.

In trail running, the paths are usually narrow. Passing another runner can be tricky. But one of my favorite aspects of trail running is the comradery and respect. Yes, we're competitive, but we're not assholes. Any trail runner in my position could easily keep their pace and block the path. But to the vast majority of trail runners—every runner I've ever met—that thought wouldn't even occur. As the young woman caught back up to me, it didn't occur to me either. I side-stepped off the trail and let her pass. *Thanks*, she said. *Good work*, I replied.

For the next couple miles, longer than I planned, I fought like hell to keep the young woman in sight, hoping she'd get tired and slow down. Sometimes I'd pass her, but then she'd quickly pass me. We were both getting tired. I got the feeling, though, that she, like me, would rather pass out on the trail than lose the friendly back-and-forth. I could also tell she was more experienced than me. So, I did the math—I had meant to go faster than usual, for longer than usual, but not like this. This young woman, whoever she was, had whooped my ass as far as I was concerned. I started to settle back

into the pace I had originally planned. *Good work*, I thought, as I watched her widen the gap between us. Then I realized something: This young woman wasn't wearing a pack. Which meant she wasn't carrying snacks and electrolytes and water. If you're running the full distance, that's not sustainable. (Not to most, anyway.) Was she just a total badass, more than I already commended her for, or was she…

Shit, I thought. *She's part of a relay team.*

Part of the Robin Ames Foundation 50k was a 50k relay. In other words, you and however many friends you wanted to bring along could split the distance and run sections individually. This young woman was basically *sprinting* the first 6.2-mile loop because that was likely all she had planned for the day. I had nearly exhausted myself on the first of five loops trying to overtake someone I wasn't even competing against.

I laughed quietly to myself. *You dork*, I thought. *Calm down and run your race.* As the young woman left my eyesight, still going strong, I grinned and shook my head. "Goddamn," I said out loud. "Good work."

Toward the end of my junior year in high school, I began to receive compliments and praise from women other than my girlfriend. My body was smaller, trim, tan. It garnered attention like a delicate ornament on a Christmas tree. I broke up with my girlfriend and began binging sex and love.

Somewhere along the line, "sex" and "intimacy" unlinked in my head. Sex was a performance, a chance to show off the body I'd beaten and starved. Intimacy required feeling vulnerable in front of another person. The last time I had felt vulnerable in front of other people was at nine years old at a dinner table. And in that moment, food had been the comfort. Not people.

I didn’t need intimacy; I learned how to replace that. Sex, on the other hand, was hard-earned validation, a compliment to my body.

The routine was to go on a date or two with someone new, have sex, and feel like everything was going just fine. It lasted for years—from high school to well into my thirties. At 36 I met a pretty stranger at a brewery with two shots already in me. She was nervous and sweet. She wore a long, flowery skirt and a black tank top. Her hair had streaks of gray because she’d decided to embrace it, not try to hide it with color. I liked that about her. We hit it off right away. We talked about music and the difference between a lager and an ale and what’s actually at the center of a black hole. We watched people sing karaoke. I told her my song would be Taking Back Sunday’s *Cute Without The ‘E’* and she tried to get me to sing it and I said I didn’t like the stage. We had sex that night and made plans to hang out again soon. But as the second date got closer, staying the path got harder.

As with many women, I started to feel nervous or stressed or upset about something. The second I start getting nervous or stressed or upset, I crave food. Sugar in particular. I knew I’d fight the urge but eventually lose, binging thousands of calories in minutes. Then I’d be ashamed of myself, my lack of will, my body. Then I’d punish myself. Sometimes by eating until my stomach was so full I would throw up, sometimes by punching or slapping myself across the face, sometimes by adding miles to my run the next day. But always, always by canceling the date I had planned.

The last third of the loop at Cooper’s Rock, the incline is brutal. Rocks and roots and slippery logs cover the path. I jump carefully. The last thing I need is to land on a slippery log and face-dive into the ground. Eventually I reach what will become my favorite section of the race: Rock City.

Out of nowhere, a sign points downward from the dirt path to a narrow passage that can best be described as a crevasse, with steep rock walls on either side. The trail drops 30-40 feet, widening out to three yards at most. At the bottom, it's an entirely different world. I look up beyond the few feet in front of me and try to take it all in.

A thick layer of autumn leaves blankets the ground. A few trees have managed to sprout along the path and reach skyward, and massive rocks pile up along the path. I pass little stone hallways to my right and left and find myself wishing I wasn't in the middle of a race, so I could explore the area. The sun slips in through the tree branches, creating slices of orange light across the ground, and fog still hangs in the air. It's like I've slipped off the path and into a fantasy novel—now I'm on a quest to toss a ring into the fiery depths of Mordor. Rock City is no more than 80 yards long, but it's enough to distract me from the pain in my legs and keep me going.

A few years earlier, while the pandemic was in full swing, I would wake up at 4 a.m. for my morning run through the streets of Kansas City. I'd gotten into the habit of rolling off my cot the second the alarm went off, not allowing myself the opportunity to fall back asleep. I would stand up and stretch and imagine how my stomach might look in the mirror. Sometimes the sight of my body disappointed me, sometimes it didn't. Keeping my eyes down to avoid the mirror, I would walk into the bathroom to take a piss—imagining that emptying my bladder would shave off a few millimeters. I didn't want the sight of my piss-bloated stomach tainting the first glance of how my body *actually* looked. I'd pee and go over the previous night's numbers in my head—at 6'1" and 194.2 pounds and 33 years old, my body mass index was at the top end of "Average." I knew I could do better. There were still little bulges of fat hanging just above my hip bones. After pissing, when I was confident I'd be at my lowest possible weight, I would step onto the

scale—192.5 pounds. Better, but not there yet. Only then would I look into the mirror. And whether the sight of my body disappointed me that morning or not dictated how much I'd eat that day—or if I would even eat at all.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 192.5 pounds is considered "Overweight" for my height. That's why my long-term goal was 180 pounds—that would just barely put me in the "Healthy Weight" category. But according to the CDC's body mass index calculation, I could drop down to 140 pounds before I'd cross the threshold from "Healthy Weight" to "Underweight."

As I write this today—years after Kansas City and the 50k in Coopers Rock State Park—people say I'm skinny at 180 pounds and that I should eat more. "140" is a number that would terrify them if I ever mentioned it. So, I keep it to myself.

Five years before my 4 a.m. runs in Kansas City, I was in the Marine Corps—lifting twice a day and avoiding running at all costs. I left the Corps a bulky 232.1 pounds. My final physical told me I had high cholesterol and high blood pressure. So, when I moved to begin college I started running every day and avoided eating meat. A few months later, someone said I looked really good, thin. I ran more and started skipping meals.

When I'd finally face the mirror in my apartment in Kansas City and examine my body, I was almost always disappointed. I'd put my hands on my sides and push through to the sharp hipbone underneath. The mushy pulp between my hands and the bone had to go. I'd grab it and squeeze and stretch it out, pinching and bruising the area, punishing it for existing. Sometimes I'd imagine that compressing the areas of fat would break apart the tissue and allow it to dissolve into my body. In my downtime, I would knead the fat to a pulp.

In front of the mirror, I'd turn to the right and check my

side profile. I'd force myself to relax, so I could get an honest sense of how far my gut stuck out. The bulge between my chest and waistline needed to go too. I'd angle my body slightly, observing my love handles—the bubbles of fat dripping off my hipbones and bulging just above my ass. I had a long way to go. Every morning I'd tell myself that today was the day I'd achieve perfection with my diet and exercise routine. No mistakes. Follow the plan exactly.

The thing about demanding perfection, though, is that when you trip up even a little bit, the day feels ruined. Countless times I'd stray from my diet one millimeter—a candy bar, a cheeseburger, a glass of milk—and end up calling the day a waste and punishing myself by eating twelve donuts or two boxes of cereal. It's like I was walking on the side of a cliff with a bag of M&Ms, testing my resolve by promising myself that I'd hurl my body into the void if I even thought about eating one of those little pieces of chocolate. Staying on the cliff takes incredible focus—eyes down, no mistakes, don't fuck up.

I had to earn every calorie I consumed. At the time I ate mostly salads and limited my dairy intake to shredded cheese. I only ate complex carbs like whole grains because they break down more slowly in the stomach, making you feel fuller longer. I'd only eat between noon and 8 p.m. because of intermittent fasting. The desire to avoid food until noon was so deeply ingrained that my stomach didn't even grumble until midday.

Sometimes I'd tighten my eating window to 2-6 p.m. Sometimes though, I'd test my resolve and only eat dinner. Sometimes I didn't eat at all. Once I didn't eat for three days. They say it's good for you, fasting. Supposedly there's anti-aging benefits; when you starve your body, you force it to attack the older cells and generate new ones. I'd never spoken to a nutritionist about any of that, though. I still haven't.

When I avoided food, I'd sometimes stare at my body and tell myself the second I ate or drank water, I would no longer be as skinny as I was right then. With every bite and every sip, my mind would weigh the calories and calculate my stomach expansion to determine the number of miles I'd need to run or the amount of pull ups I'd need to complete to rid myself of the food. I'd finish the equation and process the thoughts and motivate myself to run.

Time on the trail is slow time, and the Coopers Rock 50k is no different. There are long stretches when everything's clicking and there's nothing to occupy your mind. In those minutes, sometimes hours, your mind has a tendency to ruminate on anything and everything.

I keep my eyes on the trail in front of me and sink into my memory.

I joined the Marine Corps when I was 20 years old. All my friends had gone to college, but I didn't have the grades for it, so I got a job at a factory instead. When I got fired, I had to call my mom to ask for rent money. She cried on the phone and said *okay*. I hung up and drove to the recruiting office. A couple months later I was on my way to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, California.

The Marine Corps loves running. Over the course of my seven-and-a-half-year career, men with more rank and power than me would relish in lining me and my fellow junior Marines into formations and running us for miles while singing cadences about Marine Corps history and killing people. I despised it. Running was a power flex for officers. My buddies and I rebelled by hitting the weight room and spending hundreds of dollars on Bodybuilding dot com, lifting heavier and heavier while we drank protein shakes and pre-workout and popped multivitamins and creatine and pills meant to increase your

testosterone.

Lifting was another way to hyper-focus on my body. My body weight increased with the amount I could lift. In what felt like no time, I weighed approximately 230 pounds. I could bench press 305 pounds, deadlift over 400 pounds, and squat nearly 500 pounds. To maintain strength and size like that means eating. A lot. I ate thousands of calories a day—pretty much whatever I wanted—and lifted heavy and scoffed at officers with their trim runners' bodies. Then I got out of the military and went to college.

For nearly eight years I was in a field where I was well-trained and disciplined. I held a job that prompted respect from folks I had never met—*thank you for your service*. Then suddenly, I was 27 years old, surrounded by 19-year-old young adults who, though nice enough, had totally different perspectives than mine. I didn't fit in, and there weren't many people I could relate to. I quickly felt othered, ostracized. I grew depressed and anxious. I felt like I was a failure who couldn't make it in the real world.

I also dragged around a not-yet-realized PTSD diagnosis. Eventually I'd see a therapist and start to heal, but I didn't feel like I had that option at the time because I was drowning in comparative suffering. In my mind, I wasn't allowed to have PTSD or depression or anxiety because I had several friends who'd gone through so much worse than me. What would they think if I claimed to have PTSD? In my mind, they'd call me a faker—a phony, looking for some extra disability money every month. So, I did what I always did when I was depressed and frustrated: I took it out on my body.

I got out of the Marine Corps in 2015. By 2018, I was running for 30 minutes a day and still lifting. Soon after that, I was running for an hour every day and fitting in a lifting session when I felt like it. By the time I ran my first 50k in Minnesota, I had stopped lifting altogether.

Running was a way to occupy my body so I could process the thoughts plaguing me. It was a way to leave people and responsibility behind and enjoy some peace and quiet. It was a way to keep my weight in check while I began binging again. It was also a way to rebel against my Marine Corps identity, which I had grown to hate. I didn't want to be seen as a Marine anymore; I just wanted to be another guy nobody looked twice at. So I ran off the size and strength and grew my hair out—the calling cards of my military self, left in a puddle of sweat somewhere behind me.

On the Coopers Rock trail, I trip and catch myself before I fall, pulling myself out of my thoughts. I check my gear and look around quicky to get my bearings. Refocused, I put my eyes down again and keep running.

After I left Kansas City, I moved into an apartment in Grand Forks, North Dakota across the street from an 8.6-mile loop called the Greenway. I ran the loop once or twice every morning without eating any food or drinking any water. (I ran early in the morning, which wasn't in my eating window, after all.) I'd take off after my 4 a.m. wake-up, then I'd shower, pack my lunch, and walk one block to the brewery where I worked. I wouldn't even think about touching food until noon. *Stay the course, eyes down, focus*.

Around this time, I began to consider bumping up from marathons to ultramarathons. I'd completed four or five marathons, mostly without eating or drinking anything the entire 26.2 miles. I realized I would never be fast enough to run a sub-three-hour marathon, which had been my goal. But I knew I could maintain a decent pace for a long period. I began to research what it took to run an ultra. One of the first things you learn when looking into running 30+ miles is that runners eat *while* they're running. And not just gel packs and gummies. Some of them eat whole meals.

Fasting as an ultrarunner is almost unheard of. When you're on the trail for 30 or 50 or even 100 miles, the body depletes its glycogen stores quickly. You have to eat *a lot* while you're running to replace it, otherwise you'll "bonk"—a silly word for "hit the wall," when your body exhausts all of its glycogen and has to shift from burning the sugary fuel to burning fat. And fat breaks down much, much slower than glycogen. If you want to keep going the distance, you have to give your body simple sugars while you're running. Which presented a unique dilemma for me, and my body.

I avoided sweets because even one cookie or ice cream cone would derail my carefully planned diet. One taste of something I "shouldn't" have would lead to me binging over 10,000 calories in a matter of minutes. But now, if I wanted to be good at ultrarunning, I'd have to address my eating habits head on. I'd have to live with food I considered "bad," not avoid it.

I started slowly, buying what I considered to be healthier versions of sugary snacks. I'd take off for long runs and tuck the snacks into a tiny storage belt I bought from the local running store. When I'd get close to 30 minutes on the trail, I'd pull out a snack and tell myself *it's okay, you need this, it's okay* and take careful bites. I began thinking of those snacks as fuel, not sweet treats that cheated my diet. Because I now needed these things, I didn't feel the urge to binge like I had before. Before long, running wasn't just a way to check out from the noise in my head—it was a way to eat *really* good food without feeling guilty or feeling the need to punish my body.

During the 50k at Coopers Rock State Park, I reach the base of an impossibly steep hill—the last segment. The path swoops

left and right to lessen the grade, but it’s still steep enough to slow my run down to an open-stride hike. The rocks and roots are damp and slippery, so I keep my head down and my eyes peeled. After surviving four clean laps, it would be a real shame to have to drop from the race for a stupid fall only minutes from the finish line.

I check my watch—I’ve been running for just over four hours. I need to eat something every 30 minutes. I reach into one of the pockets of my Black Diamond running pack and pull out a blueberry Nature’s Bakery Fig Bar. The tiny snack is perfect for ultrarunners. It’s 200 calories, 38 grams of which are carbs, and it fits in the palm of your hand. I rip open the pack and start eating the bar.

When choosing the right running snacks, carbs are the name of the game. Your body needs simple sugars that break down into fuel quickly. I’ve always looked for snacks that have the highest number of carbs per calories.

Eating on the run is a science. Since you’re chewing, it’s tough to breathe through your mouth. You have to run slow enough to breathe through your nose—but not so slow that you’re no longer competitive. On top of that, your mouth is usually super dry because you’re constantly on the verge of dehydration. So, you have to sip water or electrolytes. My pack has holsters for two 16-ounce collapsible water bottles on my chest. Between chewing I crane my neck down so I can take a sip of orange Gatorade—80 calories and 22 grams of carbs per scoop, three scoops of powder mixed between two water bottles.

I finish the fig bar, stuff the trash into a pouch in my pack, and keep hiking up the incline.

After years of on-and-off dating and failed relationships, I finally met my wife, Becca, a Physician Assistant in Pittsburgh. When she was in her mid-twenties, Becca had become pregnant while working as a hairdresser in Nashville. She decided that she wanted more for her son, so she went back to school and got her degree. Then she got into a PA degree plan, a highly competitive, two-year program that only allows its students to miss two days of class. Through two degrees, she endured the judgmental stares of fellow students whose eyes would linger on her tattoos as they passed by her in the halls, on the little boy in her arms with toys to occupy him while she sat through college lectures.

To say I love and respect and admire my wife doesn't even scratch the surface. She's everything to me. She's the only person I've ever been completely honest with when it comes to my disordered eating and body image issues.

And one of the many, many things she loves to do is cook.

Many nights I stand with her in the kitchen and offer to help. She always gives me a small task—quartering potatoes, washing rice, stirring sauce. Cooking is relaxing for her. She's calm and confident as she spins from the oven to the sink and back in our tiny kitchen. She mixes and slices and samples the food, piecing together the puzzle step-by-step. Sometimes she stops to give the food a taste test. If it needs something, she'll wrinkle her nose. If it's perfect, she does a little dance in celebration. I watch and laugh and learn from her. She likes having me there, and I like witnessing food as a form of love and meditation.

Before I met Becca, I always managed to hide my food issues behind a veil by telling friends and family I was just eating healthy, or on a diet. It made sense to them; I've been an active and competitive person for years, so it stands to reason that I'd be careful about what I eat. But I always hid the struggle behind the supposed control. My disordered eating

was the thing I wouldn’t, or couldn’t, talk about. And because I didn’t talk about it, it would disrupt my relationships with family and friends and potential lovers. But that all stopped when I met Becca.

As much abuse as I level against my body, I’ve learned to trust it when it comes to other people. Your body reacts when you meet someone new. We call it “instinct” or a “gut reaction,” but it all means the same thing. Your mind tells a story; your body tells the truth.

Becca and I hit it off right away. As we grew closer, I found myself being honest—*insisting* to myself that I be honest—when I’d have an eating episode. I started slowly by just being truthful about my disordered eating and addressing her questions or concerns. Then I’d tell her if I binged. She’d ask the right questions, questions that required vulnerability on my part, like, *what were you feeling or thinking about when you started binging?*

One night we were in her kitchen, playing around, when I made a joke about my weight in high school. I don’t remember what I said. I probably called myself a “fat boy” or something. But the joke flipped a switch in Becca. Her face went from happy and playful to concerned. *What do you mean by that?* she asked. I told her everything. I watched her heart break from the other side of the kitchen. These things I’d been carrying were dense and scary. But I was so used to them that it didn’t occur to me how awful they were. It took seeing Becca’s reaction to realize how entrenched the negative thoughts about my body had become. It was as if I’d been running for years through a treacherous crevasse, my eyes and attention wholly-focused on the two-or-three feet ahead of me. And it wasn’t until I found Becca that I thought to look up and marvel at the beauty around me.

The last one hundred yards of the last Coopers Rock loop is finally in sight. A stone and log staircase, with a sign that says, “Stairway to (Almost) Heaven,” is the last obstacle before the finish line comes into view. I’m not ashamed to walk up these stairs, head down and eyes scanning for any last-minute roots trying to snag me on the homestretch. I widen my stride and give the muscles in my calves a break. When I hit the top of the stairs, I bend over, take in a huge breath, and push on to the finish line. People cheer and wave me in and say things like *hey man good job* and *you got the course record* and *congrats*. I’m too tired to respond to them, but I’m grateful for their praise. I’m grateful that a few friends came to meet me at the finish line. And I’m grateful that the race is finally over.

I catch my breath and rub my stomach, imagining only for a moment how flat it must be after so much exertion. I grin from ear to ear, take a look around, and soak it all up. There are no mirrors out here, no scales to tell me how much I weigh, and no urge to punish my body—no urge to punish *myself*. Because my body is not an appendage separate from my mind, or a thing to focus my frustrations on. It’s the greatest instrument I’ll ever have, and it’s capable of extraordinary things. In this moment, I’m truly grateful for it.

I walk over to a table serving free burrito bowls to runners. *One with everything*, I say pleasantly. They load up a bowl with beef and cheese and lettuce and sour cream and salsa. I stop them right before they try to add the last ingredient though—crushed up Doritos. *No thanks*, I think to myself. *I don’t eat that shit.*