

# Mean Imogene

By Kevin McCarthy

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Imogene's a bitch. Cold and hard when I'm tuckered. Unforgiving when I'm slap-dash. Vengeful when I'm weak. But she's also constant, inspiring, patient, and breathtaking. I love Imogene. Ten or eleven times now I've completed the Imogene Pass Run – a 17-mile long, one-mile thick quickstep over hellacious old roads between Ouray (7,811') and Telluride (8,820') Colorado. The pass itself is officially 13,114 feet tall. There's no "correct" way to pronounce the name. An old-timer once assured me that EYEmogene was the correct pronunciation because "it does have an 'I' in it."

It's a mystery how many times I've completed the run because I've never been a great quantifier. When it comes to exercise, I generally shoot for tired, then try to push on to real tired. My best times were just under three and a half hours, but I have no clue what that means in terms of splits. More recently, I tend to finish at around (she's so fine, my) 4:09.

My wife Patricia has completed the run seven or eight times. We're not what you might think of as distance runners. The elite pacesetters are built like insects – long appendages and small, bullet-proof thoraxes. Patricia and I are what kind people call "long-waisted." We're not hugely out of shape, just equipped with sturdy coffee table legs. Actually, she's a leggy Ginger Rogers compared to me. Her Fred is more Flintstone than Astaire.

Ultra-marathoners probably scoff at a mere 17 miles at rugged altitude, but behaviors I've acted out and witnessed attest that it's a stout morning's work for most of us. My friend Katharine Hauge, a strong marathoner, remembers whimpering as she careened over the pass with frozen fingers and untied shoes. The miner's nickname for your destination – "to Hell you ride" – takes on a grim resonance. One year, when the fog was thick, I staggered into a tunnel wondering if I was going to make it out the other side. I was saved by a backlit blonde angel bearing a tray of lemon drops. Imogene taught me the hard truth about hypoglycemia. But I also learned that when you're not graceful, you can still be entertaining. Patricia loved my cotton-mouthed response to a handful of fruit at the finish line: "Thank."

The run was famously informal in the early years. In the late '80's a small, muscular guy used to show up dragging an enormous wooden cross. He'd sidle up to other runners and proselytize during the run. He must've been a charmer, because he always found someone to help him carry the burden. This provided unexpected motivation for us heathens. The crusader targeted me for a sermon one year, but I dug deep and scampered away, my parched lips mouthing "not my cross to bear."

Folks tend to be either miserable or ecstatic as they pick their way through the chockablock terrain. Trouble is, the ecstatics piss off the miserables. The first few years I was morose most of the time. Now I generally find a groove early. Occasionally I'll round a bend or top a rise and feel a shout coming up from the toes. If I keep the brain in neutral, it surges through the larynx, unforced. These days, when I feel it coming, I try to get some separation. But for a few years, while transitioning from default-miserable to default-ecstatic, I scared the bejabbers out of some wretched souls.

2006 was an asterisk. For the first time in 33 years, there was no Pass in the Imogene Pass Run. Dire weather predictions prompted the race board members have the course altered. Runners

were diverted to a high loop and returned to Ouray – a strenuous 15 miles, but not the real deal. About three dozen of us went on to Telluride. I did it because I was familiar with the course and beguiled by blue skies ahead. It hadn't been a stellar run thus far. I'd committed a cardinal sin of race day preparation by eating something strange – a huge spelt muffin – for breakfast. I was sweating ore buckets, despite the chill. The muffin wanted out.

Still, as often, pushing on was a good decision. Eleven miles without aid was well compensated. I had lemon drops – though, alas, no angel – and drank from streams, figuring Giardia was unlikely at that altitude. The urge to spill spelt subsided. There was a little fog but no wind on the pass, and the fresh snow provided foot pillows on the descent. Echoing yahoos came frequently. Near Tomboy an osprey circled close overhead, trying to grok the shouting bear – not his bear to cross, I deliriously supposed. As usual, the weather improved down the stretch. It felt great to run largely alone – or largely, alone – and arrive in Telluride incognito.

Every year at his pre-race slide show, founder Rick Trujillo says the trick is to just keep moving. I like how that applies to Life In General. It can be bleak, but turning back or hunkering doesn't get me where I need to go. Staying focused on the run buys me a stellar après-snee. Kids and dogs line hyper-quaint Oak Street to greet the runners – often under an electric-blue sky. And the first bite of a Palisade peach at the finish line can change your blood type. Thank!

Once I heard Van Morrison describing the bliss that can occur on stage. His interviewer said something like, "It must feel great, turning within like that." But Van corrected him: "It's a turning without." Exactly. I live for the outward turning – in gratitude for all that is, was, and might be. Crisply aware of everything outside my own skin. Pristine Imogene is a can opener that peels me away from self. I'd like to break four hours again, but to Hell (you ride) with that. I have trouble with time and space anyway. I just want to blot the "I" in Imogene.