Haven't We Met
An athlete's journey into the place of his making.

““For long months of days and weeks Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock rounding in mid-winter that dreary, howling Patagonia cape; then is was that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another.” Herman Melville, Moby Dick

Kenny Glah shuffles out onto a particular and straight ribbon of asphalt. The perennial top-twenty finisher has just left the town of Kailua-Kona and is entering mostly alone, a very lonesome road. Never mind the 1799 other triathletes; he knows the Queen Kaahumanu Highway is the same as it ever was—hot pavement threading fields of descendant lava.

The Kilauean pahoehoe extends the land as it reaches the sea, a place where Glah, 48, began this morning. Over time the lava will crumble and crack into older forms of igneous rock. But for now, Glah’s slowly-hardening legs are staying the course.

As he makes the left turn at the top of Palani Road, he can see back to where he began that very morning alongside the Kailua-Kona pier, a place where cattle and European disease were off-loaded from ships in the 1900s, a view part historical trajectory, part tragic history. Glah might be able to see eight hours or eighty years in arrears but not a quarter century ago when he first competed here and finished in the top ten. You see, as he gazes north toward the run course turnaround, the big boxes of Costco and Wal-Mart and Sports Authority have blocked his view of the Pacific horizon, quashing any reflexivity that might empower his next few hours. He might think that Kona is not so much a town without a plan but a town that doesn’t want one, a sleepy place with a high caffeine threshold.

For the moment, this congested paradise is on hold; spectators and tourists corralled into lower seaside streets cluttered with faux T-shirt shops, ABC stores and one microscopic surf shop called Pacific Vibrations. The little store is perhaps the most worthy vestige of authentic aloha left in commercial Kona, a counter cultural closet that transcends time, space and lobster-colored tourists. During Race Day, proprietors Mike and Simi McMichaels aren’t seen passing out decals and 10% off coupons but are busy organizing the volunteer swim safety crew. Kailua Bay is theirs. And no one drowns on their beach.

Up the hill from town, the Queen ‘K’ is some kind of endurance sport DMZ; a dark territory requiring credentials to enter and a lot more to leave. The air is lighter up the hill. In town and along the shoreline Alii Dr. there is a quilted-down weight to the tropical smells pressing in on you. Unless you are training or racing or purposely engaged in some kind of sport, in the heart of Kailua-Kona you need a reason to move.

I watch Kenny from the seat of my borrowed beach cruiser bike. The old dog is doing his thing and I grunt some kind of good luck as he shuffles past. He might hear me or he

might not. The incorrigible Kenny is alone with the road, eyes fixed on a dotted white line, a sweet black hell spread out before him.

There is a kind of muddled clarity to the language of the Hawaiian Ironman Triathlon. Only the dialects are different.

Anyone who's been to Kona knows that the beauty of West Hawaii lies in the rents and the seams, the places that require a four-wheel drive imagination. And for the overly-expectant, the Kona landscape might be seen as God's oversight. Yes, a barren littoral zone and watery rum drinks and mildewed hotel rooms will mock the wide-eyed competitor. It takes a certain kind of investment to find the good stuff here. Some athletes are willing agents, dropping pretense and guidebook visions. Others with a failing patience are subjected to the tyranny of Mainland-style hubris. They might get what they thought they came for or they might go home wondering what happened in the process of connected those dots on the 138 miles of highway. If you show up thinking that you are too cool for Kona, the wind and the sun and the heat will hunt you down like a wounded animal. Because as slow as new land formations occur, you cannot outrun nor detour the blackness of lava. Pahoehoe is formed between 1100* and 1200* C. At 100* F. the land wants a blanket.

Ambivalence has not place when competing in the Ironman.

Glah's motives are not exactly clear in the fading afternoon. The dwindling cadre of aid station workers positioned at every mile of the marathon run, Kona's own cops running interference and the few credentialed well-wishers who inhabit the barren roadside seem trapped inside an Eagles' song—a Hotel California that should be such a lovely place, such a lovely face. That dark desert highway and cool wind in his hair does little to reduce the grand poignancy of Glah's steady plodding. He's been here before--twenty four times—the consummate and unheralded journeyman, an aging pro triathlete punching a full moon clock each October since he graduated college. Bearing down on a half century, Ken Glah has never won this race.

And he never will.

Like many triathletes who submit to the gravitational pull of Kona each year, Glah accepts his addiction and allows the one-day high to float his yearly voyage. He might have a choice, but not really. He might find a better life, if not a better vacation, by visiting Las Vegas or Cabo San Lucas or the Jersey shore. But those autumn options pale when lined up on the mirror he finds himself confronting. Glah and the habitual army of triathletes stand sentinel to everything good, bad and ugly about the Ironman.

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When I returned to Kona for the thirtieth anniversary last October, my highly-developed ambivalence was working just like I'd planned—a force field against nostalgia and whimsy. My two victories from 1982 and 1985 had faded on paper and in collective

memory, politely acknowledged in some cursory nod from well-wishing back-in-the-day types. I had come to Kona with an upgraded pedigree, new graduate school letters after my name and words like “ubiquitous” and “existential” dripping from my chapped lips.

It’d taken me a long time to learn to become a teacher and I consider myself satisfied if not happy enough. But a return to one’s own Eden is perhaps the apotheosis of the prevailing culture of professional sport. This is it, I mused while standing fully-exposed to West Hawaii—sweet memory—the last true currency of any value. I’d come home but the house looked different and the people who lived there were not the same as it ever was. Heavenly manna tasted a lot like white bread. Watching old Ken lurp away at his silver anniversary, his 70s mullet rocking from shoulder to shoulder, a metronome of past times and tides, I loved and hated him for his tenure. Give it up, Kenny, I thought. What’s the damn point? But I knew and watched the historiography pulse through his veins. For the briefest of moments, I wanted to trade places, let him ride my borrowed bike so that I might dance just one more time around that ring of fire. Somehow, I willed that desire away, convincing myself that Ironman was the utter embracement of the trivial. What IS the damn point?

This is not war.

Oh, yes it is.

For mortal stakes?

Immortal stakes.

Ridiculous. War is hell. Sport is fun.

And at mile 22 of the marathon do your legs and heart feel heavenly?

Sport is trivial.

Then so is life.

For two decades the event meant everything to me. Regardless of what my life would dish up, out of the bony sinew of the world an Ironman in October tossed up something with truth and teeth.

And I would allow myself to be swallowed by it as if it utterly defined me.

Because it did. And now that somehow seems sad. Not trivial but laced with a kind of non-descript sorrow.

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The aching scent of saltwater and dried orchids and the sound of TV helicopters in the low sky never leaves you.

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If you participate at Ironman only a few times you might be able to walk away without rehab or counseling. But after a decade it's too late. Life without parole, it can suck like it blows. You tell the same tales, frequent the same coffee bars and return to see if your mai-tai-induced initials are still carved on the back bar at the Kona Inn. Ten will get you twenty. Twenty will hold you down and commit you to some endlessly-looped film of the infamous '82 Julie Moss crawl-to-finish. That Ground Hog Day milieu where you can check out but you can never leave? It is the solitary confinement of one-too-many trips up and down the Queen K.

During pre-race week, the experienced competitors mingle around the Ironman expo like Schopenhauer's Porcupines, huddling together for support but keeping each other at bay with their prickly pretentions.

Glah was now hopelessly institutionalized. He must love it just enough to hate not loving it.

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I love Kona. And I never loved it more than when I fell in love all over again last October. Except perhaps when I first fell in love with it in 1981. My first time. Naïve, an unexpected 3rd place, it remains the purest moment in my thirty year career. Utterly irreplaceable.

F. Scott Fitzgerald told us that there are no second acts in America. And perhaps in détente with Warhol's fifteen minutes is all you get, for the first time I was a spectator, uninvited by organizers, no official duties other than what I could rustle up to generate minor involvement if not validation and a tax write-off. Twenty years had gotten me to thirty but in the last ten, the event had taken no stake in me. I was there to, well, to drink mai-tais and write in the shadow of ancient heiaus, Hawaiian burial grounds where the voices are quiet or angry but always insightful.

For a recovering athlete, there is the threat of feelings of absence and vacuity. I saw it sitting out on the edge, casing its way back. October without Ironman had replaced April as the cruelest of months. But somehow the town had stayed with me, a lost puppy grown into a faithful companion. Kona had seen the outside world bearing down on itself, concrete and rebar replacing bamboo and teak. It too must've felt the dark pangs of anomie. And I, partly at fault, a roving Ironman minstrel touting some sweet ukulele breezes as I raced in places like Panama City, Florida and Lexington, Kentucky, had dissed it while missing the hell out of it.

Why is it that we always try to kill the very things that we love?

But there I was on October 17, 2008, a forgotten winner, learning how to watch.

What some athletes do is endeavor to cheat death, train and race their way right pass the Master's division and into immortality. But it never works that way. You find yourself caught between memory's chisel and arthritic knees. And you see that this is the way it goes—life changing one tropical sunset and one car payment at a time.

Earlier in the week I'd swam out to a small sailing outrigger anchored in Kailua Bay. They were serving fresh Kona coffee to the morning swimmers, a swim-up java bar staffed by the kindest of da kine locals.

"What can I get you, bud?" It was the 1988 Ironman champion and arguably the greatest all-around triathlete in history, Scott Molina passing out the hot, black nectar. I'd heard rumors that he'd been out there all week but had passed it as some local lore. And when he passed down a small cup it seemed like a host, a body of the past in an implacable moment proving that history can and will fail to situate itself in some expected present.

"What are you doing?" I asked, incredulously.

"It doesn't get any better, does it?" he replied while adjusting his sunglasses and handing a Dixie cup of coffee to a young swimmer whose body was so hard you might chip a tooth on it. And at that moment it all spun out for me. I'd just witnessed Joe DiMaggio passing out caps in Yankee Stadium on Hat Night.

When Scott Molina and I were kids, sports were something that you passed through on your way to adulthood. When we began training together in the early 80s there was nothing that he wouldn't do and in my naïve acceptance of this "perfect job," I wouldn't do either. I followed him into unchartered endurance territory. We were sodbusters cycling 400 miles and running 80 every week. We were young and naïve and could do no wrong. We'd made sport its own virtue.

On occasion we'd talk about what we'd do when we retired but not really. There was the obligatory "get together for bar-b-cues," "sleep in," "maybe coach a few kids," but the dream was grounded in that visceral present and we only let it out to see the horizon on rare occasions, the future held hostage by all the fun of playing hero-in-training.

At the moment I saw Molina paying it forward on the boat I realized that he hadn't mortgaged his future as much as he'd realized that some dreams, like some nightmares, cannot be killed, only negotiated.

As old icons gone to some near-shore pasture, we were not alone. Besides Glah and Molina, there was 1994 Ironman champion, Greg Welch giving pre-race advice on the pier and 1997 winner Heather Fuhr organizing a local fun-run and eight time winner Paula Newby Fraser, the Queen of Kona, passing out sun screen and good will. "Newby" was also the acting Pro Liaison for the event. Can you imagine having to negotiate as a

young tennis player with Andre Agassi for a free hotel room? Each was there for reasons that only reason knows. I tried to relate to their physical bootlegging, their attempt at re-ordering time, and their utter contempt for the very notion of acquiescence toward an aging body. I couldn't understand but I was beginning to comprehend.

There was six-time winner Mark Allen, happy to have left it all behind him well over a decade ago. He had his "people" whom he coached. And they him. They seemed to enjoy the partnership. My own people were my students, back at home, hopefully doing the assigned homework. Most of them think Ironman is a welding contest in Bakersfield, California or that movie with what's-his-name. There was the consummate top-ten finisher from Brazil, Fernanda Keller, looking universally glamorous in her fourth decade, gliding towards a top twenty finish. There was 1997 champion, the German Thomas Hellriegal, doing his best impression of an aging Uberkid. There was Ironman Japan winner, Paul Huddle doing TV commentary in such dry humor that even the cynical back-in-the-dayites missed his jokes.

And if not for some kind of blood clot, a malady normally reserved for the aged, the ageless six-time champion and my perennial archrival Dave Scott, 53, would've been competing. I suppose that Dave is not so much defined by the Ironman as he is the Ironman. Some people may feel or experience the event at a deeper level than him but no one knows it better.

I don't know that he's missed a year since 1979.

They all must've known why they had returned. Because to be at the Ironman without motive is like being sent to prison an innocent man.

And there are many lined up to get in; maybe 15, 20, I don't know, 30 thousand athletes if the course could handle it. People from everywhere, an Olympic Village style collective, some with fascinating stories, others who seem to ignore history; Kona is a multiplicity of cultures and cults.

If you can't find what you need here somebody will get it for you.

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The Ironman is nothing if not an extended negotiation. One makes deals with themselves and family members and bosses and loved ones and unloved ones and in the end, some kind of dealer from higher up. When simple breathing is a challenge and sleeping makes you tired, you will go down to the Crossroads to make your deal for that finisher's medal. The finish line on Alii Dr. has become its own its own Valhalla. No one travels it unvanquished.

The ideal of becoming an Ironman is not unlike an addiction to something we submit to. We talk about the grand benefits of endurance sport--self-awareness, personal challenge, the chance to rise above the white noise of modernity--but it mostly comes down to our

desire for love, to be more than simply accepted. Heroes are loved. In somebody's eyes, an Ironman finisher is always heroic.

Somehow, we carve out the costs and the pain and suffering under that guise that we will somehow stand taller after that sprint down Alii Dr.

And we do.

It's okay. It really is. To deny that desire is to deny that we are human after all. Better that we admit our fallacies and listen to what our mothers said—when you have to make choices, make good ones. I was realizing that I was comparing who I'd been as an athlete to who I was a teacher and writer and whoever the hell I was. It was non-sequitur. One I'd buried. The others I was birthing.

Still, the process of negotiation is never ending. Pain has a short memory and moves laterally out of the circle of influence. Within a week, the hurt of an Ironman becomes a hollow rumor, a distant indigestion, something swallowed but successfully passed. And so you re-negotiate your contract making a few line-item changes—more swim training, smarter nutrition, a divorce—simple things that will make you go faster. They are things that you think matter until latter, when imagination and memory face off and ask in union, "Didn't I know you?" You don't really know, do you?

People like Glah and Molina have rooms full of training diaries, none of which matter after the first fifteen minutes of the 2.4 mile swim. You'd imagine that they would matter. But you don't remember.

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Part of the mystique of Ironman is the scarcity of things. A shortage of entry slots and shade and beach sand and rain and places to run and places to hide all contribute to its sacred aura. Sacred places in sport are earned over time, not purchased and packaged over the networks. What drives the demand is the lack of supply. If everything Ironman was easy, it would be a short road to a kind of Middledom, something easy but lacking any resonance or sustainability. There are dozens of major league baseball stadiums around the U.S. but only one Yankee Stadium. When it's gone, well… it's already gone. There is only one Kona and it has never been easy with anything.

Of late, Kona is mostly going in circles, tossed by the ceaseless Trade Winds and shifting dynamics in every sector. The town appears to be time and space-challenged. The coffee lines are slow, the drivers too fast, the past too distant and the future too near. Meth labs are replacing Kona Gold, arguably the best weed west of Northern California, and empty high rent boutiques morph into quick-hit sandal shops for raceweek. The best and worst of Kona is that the residents don't seem to know what to do. It's not their struggle for local sovereignty that perpetuates the angst as it is their lack of willingness to be anxious. They don't live their lives as stations of the cross.

Most of the Forbes-folks, the athletes-with-bucks, have set up camp to the north along the Kohala Coast where luxury hideaways import silky sand from India and Thailand. For them, the Queen K is a long driveway. They are athletes as well because Ironman has a tendency to meld collars—blue and blue-blood. But as they fly in on Gulfstream IVs and skip the congested town there is something lost in transit. I could enjoy a week at the Four Seasons or the Kona Village. It wouldn't be hard to compartmentalize the guilt on a sponsor's tab. But I'd probably get caught stealing the fluffy towels. It's just different out there away from the hyperbole that you swear you just can't deal with one more day.

The people of Kona though, they have a history with the people-in-the-skimpy-swiimsuits. And even though the residents of Kona love the athletes, they don't always love their baggage. The relationship is like an old marriage that has survived the vicissitudes of time growing closely separated over the years. But one cannot easily imagine the two living apart or having other partners; the Queen K replaced by Melrose Avenue. Someday it will happen and we'll all adapt. But not today.

I have never lived in Kona, but I allowed it to live in me; 140 dog-years on Alii Dr. I used to prop myself up against its soft afternoon banyans. It was the quietude of non-sexual love, a transfer of heartbeats that helped me to drop the hard-shelled veneer I'd worn getting off the plane. I knew I was vulnerable but fear and the need for a victory drug would not allow brutal honesty at the time. In recent years, it's even harder to see people's hearts on their sleeve when they're covered with compression spandex and M-Dot tattoos on their chiseled limbs.

Of course, that's the nostalgic revisionist talking. The only time I'd let spectators see me cry was at the end of the end, the finish line of year twenty and my last Ironman when all that posturing and pretensions could no longer hold back what I felt for the event and the town and the people who constitute both. Breaking up is hard to do.

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During the marathon portion of this year's event I ran into Mike Mullahey at mile four. He was hanging with a few other locals and there was a festivity in the air as they inspired and jokingly harangued the laser-focused competitors. Another Hawaiian god, Lono the jokester would've found it brilliantly funny. Mullahey has earned the right. His family came to the islands in the 1800s as missionaries and he still grows coffee, cocoa and coaches local kids. Mikey loves most of the Ironman but not all of it. What he represents is a newer sound in Kona, something like the afternoon thunderstorms, hard in noise but still soft to the touch. Through the volcanic fog and the economic crisis and public display of European thong underwear, Kailua-Kona is still no ka oi. It remains defiant on the shields of diffusing jest. God forbid that the residents of Kona ever take themselves and the event as serious as it takes itself.

Captain James Cook should've known this. Killed by the native inhabitants in 1779 near Kealakekua Bay, Cook was trying to subject a kind of Euro-style on a Polynesian milieu.

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The Ironman is nothing if not about one's dreams. Sometimes their fulfillment is our fortune and other times failure is our bed to lie upon. But to simply have dreams is the beginning and best of all endings.

Riding that beach cruiser alongside the ebullient defending women's champion, the British Chrissie Wellington as she toothpaste-smiled her way toward a repeat victory, I realized that I was proposing a settlement for a surrogate relationship, not quite prodigal and not quite détente. I wouldn't wish that I was racing so much as wonder what it might be like to participate, to finish closer to the midnight cutoff than the pro winner. That's what fresh wonder will do.

Wellington is fresh. She is a near-perfect car with no miles and race ready. Her spirit is dreamy and infectious and you find yourself wanting to be in the same room with her in hopes that some of the fairy dust she spreads will fall onto your shoulder. In a wink you forget the dynasties of Paula Newby Fraser and Natasha Badman and the few that only won two or three times.

You can tell that the winners are getting close to the finish by the sound of helicopters hovering over the pier. They are gunships of a sort, shooting miles of film that will be sent around the world, sewing seeds and dreams of something beyond the banality of daily life. There is an orgasmic tension in the air, a jouissance that causes people to run towards the finish and the sound of the copters and the momentary end of something new. It's just one day, I remind myself, but that's such lie. I have dreamt of being chased by helicopters all the way passed the horizon but always wake before I see what's over the edge.

The 2008 men's winner, Australian, Craig Alexander wove his own kind of magical journey. Classy and thankful to a fault, he is a dream champion that holds the title up, challenging future winners to win not with grave-stepping arrogance or limit-pushing technology but with grace and gratitude. I met him at the Awards Dinner and stopped just short of asking for his autograph. I liked the bloke instantly.

For the first time in several years, Craig and Chrissie made me proud of my Ironman heritage.

All dreams, subjective as they are, can be like clouds in the wind, moving and shaping and playing peek-a-boo with hearts and minds. Rational thought reminds me that someday the Perfect Wellington and the Authentic Alexander will join the ranks of disposable heroes. But right then, watching to learn, with three miles to go to the finish and a ten minute lead, the image gave me chicken skin. Oh to be young and speedy and immortal, if only for the moment.

I don't remember being that good. Or perhaps I don't want to.

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Ken Glah would finish his 25th Hawaiian Ironman as would Scott Molina his 4th, the later walking seven miles in the dark to cross in a different time zone than Wellington and Alexander. I went out onto the bike to look for my old friends but they'd come to some confluence of their own in the dark, surrounded by hundreds of age-group athletes who would pass them by in the night and never know what history they would hurdle over. They were all lost in the moon shadows, Kenny and Scott negotiating their way home to Philadelphia and New Zealand one bloody step and one Halloween glo-stick at a time. The rest, those unsuspecting armies of the night; most would agree within a few days that they'd never been more alive.

To really talk about Kona and the Ironman and the practices of meaning and purpose you have to forget about all notions of fairness. They are replaced with fate. You have to forget the concept of meritocracy. It is replaced with the moment. And you have to forgive and forget so that you can once again be a kid on a bike hoping to get home before the street lights went on. Glah and Wellington, Molina and Alexander, every last person who raced or drank mai-tais or both, they will make their odyssey home and think about what happened in Kona, what was gained and what was lost. They will not be unaffected any less than the inhabitants of Kona.

I loved Ironman (mostly) and it loved me back (sort of). But the relationship was defined more in the modifiers than the pronouns.

Now that we have nothing left to prove to each other, maybe we can be the best of friends.

Scott Tinley

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