

# EAT & RUN

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MY UNLIKELY JOURNEY TO  
ULTRAMARATHON GREATNESS

SCOTT JUREK

WITH Steve Friedman



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*A note to the reader:*

~~My book presents my own research and ideas. And while I hope you'll be inspired by them to get the most out of yourself, and out of life, keep in mind that I'm not a doctor. So by all means use this book but this book is not intended to substitute for consultation with a doctor or healthcare provider. Neither I nor the publisher can claim any responsibility for any adverse effects resulting directly or indirectly from information contained in this book.~~

Let me put it another way: If you decide to run 135 miles in Death Valley, no matter what advice of mine you do or do not follow, you do so at your own risk. But I'll be with you in spirit, every kickass step.

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*To my parents, who first taught me to dig deep, and to all those who taught me to dig deeper*

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Beyond the very extreme of fatigue and distress, we may find amounts of ease and power we never dreamed ourselves to own; sources of strength never taxed at all because we never push through the obstruction.

—WILLIAM JAM

## Prologue

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I was a shy kid with high blood pressure. I grew into a skinny adolescent whom other kids teased and called “Pee-Wee.” I wasn’t the fastest kid in my school, or the strongest, or even the smartest. I was common as grass, longing for something I couldn’t even name. I was like everyone else, the same. Then I found something.

I’m not going to offer gauzy parables about inspiration and belief. I’m not going to promise you that if you want to achieve your dream, all you need is faith. No, I am going to show you—in concrete terms—how I transformed myself from the inside out and how you can do it too. Whether you’re a marathoner or weekend jogger, swimmer or cyclist, young or old, fit or fat, you can do this. I know because I did it.

The story of my life is going to sound very familiar. Not in the details (unless you’ve found yourself face down in Death Valley, that is), but in the desire. It’s the tale of everyone who has ever felt stuck, of anyone who has dreamed of doing more, of being more.

I was stuck like that a few years ago in one of the lowest, hottest spots on the planet. That’s where I’ll start my story. That’s where I’ll start *your* story.

# 1. Somebody

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## BADWATER ULTRAMARATHON, 2005

The best way out is always through.

—ROBERT FROST

My brain was on fire. My body was burning up. Death Valley had laid me out flat, and now it was cooking me. My crew was telling me to get up, that they knew I could go on, but I could barely hear them. I was too busy puking, then watching the stream of liquid evaporate in the circle of light from my headlamp almost as fast as it splashed down on the steaming pavement. It was an hour before midnight, 105 incinerating, soul-sucking degrees. This was supposed to be *my* time. This was the point in a race where I had made a career of locating hidden reservoirs of sheer will that others didn't possess, discovering powers that propelled me to distances and speeds that others couldn't match. But tonight, roasting on the pavement, all I could summon was the memory of a television commercial I had seen as a child. First there's an egg in someone's fingers and a voice says, "This is your brain." Then the owner of the hand cracks the egg, and as it sizzles and crackles onto a hot skillet, the voice says, "And this is your brain on drugs." I saw that image in the scorching nighttime sky. I heard the disembodied voice. But what I thought was: "This is my brain on Badwater."

I had just run 70 miles through a place where others had died walking, and I had 65 more to go. I reminded myself that this was the point in the race where I was supposed to dust anyone foolish enough to have kept up with me in the first half. In fact, I had started this race intending to shatter its record, never mind worry about winning it. And now I didn't think I could finish.

There was only one answer: Get up and run. Whatever the problem in my life, the solution had always been the same: *Keep going!* My lungs might be screaming for oxygen, my muscles might be crying in agony, but I had always known the answer lay in my mind. Tired tendons had begged for relief in other places, my flesh had demanded relief, but I had been able to keep running because of my mind. But not now. What had gone wrong?

Running is what I do. Running is what I love. Running is—to a large extent—who I am. In the sport I have chosen as avocation, career, obsession, and unerring but merciless teacher, running is how I answer any challenge.

Technically speaking, I am an ultramarathoner. So I compete in any footrace longer than the marathon distance of 26.2 miles. In point of fact, though, I have fashioned a career from running *and winning* races of at least 50 miles, most often 100, and every so often 135 and 150 miles. Some I have led from start to finish; in others I have stayed comfortably back until the point when I needed to find another gear. So why was I on the side of the road vomiting, unable to go on?

Never mind my success. People had warned me that this race—this 135-mile jaunt through Death Valley—was too long and that I hadn't given my body enough time to recover from my last race—a race I had won just two weeks earlier, the rugged and prestigious Western States 100 Mile. People had said that my diet—I had been eating only plant-based foods for seven years—would never sustain me. No one had voiced what I now suspected might be my real problem—that I had underestimated the race itself.

Some ultras curve through level virgin forest, next to melodious streams, past fields of wildflowers. Some ultras occur in the cool melancholy of autumn, others in the invigorating chill of early spring.

Then there were the ultras like the one that had felled me. Its proper name was the Badwater

UltraMarathon. Competitors called it the Badwater 135, and a lot of people knew it as “the world’s toughest foot race.”

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But I hadn’t taken such talk too seriously. I thought I had run more difficult courses. I thought I had faced much faster, tougher competition. I had raced in snow and rain, won events in far corners of the earth. I had scrambled up loose rock, over peaks of 14,000 feet. I had hopscotched down boulder fields, forded across icy streams. I was used to trails that caused deer to stumble and falter.

Sure, the Badwater flat-lined through Death Valley at the hottest time of the year. And yes, according to Badwater legend, one year when a shoe company handed out its product to all entrants, many of the soles supposedly melted on the scorching pavement.

But that was just a story, right? And though the Badwater did sizzle and though it was longer than I usually race, its brutality was unidimensional. I was used to forbidding terrain, climate, *and* competition. Other ultras inspire not just reverence but fear. The Badwater? The truth is, a lot of the most accomplished and well-known ultrarunners had never run it. Yeah, Death Valley made it sound ominous, if not fatal, but among elite ultrarunners, tales of danger and death aren’t uncommon. Ultrarunners liked the stories but didn’t dwell on them. We couldn’t.

It wasn’t that I hadn’t prepared; in my line of work, lack of preparation was tantamount to self-abuse. I had purchased an industrial-sized sprayer so that I could be hosed down at regular intervals. I had worn specially designed heat-reflecting pants and shirt by Brooks Sports. I had guzzled 60 ounces of water (the equivalent of three bicycle bottles) every hour for the first 6 hours of the race. But those precautions were designed to shield my body. No industrial sprayer was going to protect my mind. And an ultrarunner’s mind is what matters more than anything.

Racing ultras requires absolute confidence tempered with intense humility. To be a champion, you have to believe that you can destroy your competition. But you also have to realize that winning requires total commitment, and a wavering of focus, a lack of drive, a single misstep, might lead to defeat or worse. Had I been too confident, not humble enough?

Early in the race, after 17 miles, a marine who had dropped out saluted me as I ran past him because he knew my reputation. Another runner, a desert race veteran, dropped out about 30 miles later, right about the time he realized his urine was flowing dark as coffee. He knew my reputation, too. But my reputation wasn’t helping me now. Neither was my earlier confidence.

The leader was a fifty-year-old ship pilot and cliff diver named Mike Sweeney, whose high dive training had included smacking himself on the head. Trailing him was a forty-eight-year-old Canadian baggage handler named Ferg Hawke, who was fond of quoting Friedrich Nietzsche.

Journalists in the running press called me “the Real Deal.” But was I? Or was I a fraud?

Moments of questioning come to us all. It is human nature to ask why we put ourselves in certain situations and why life places hurdles in our path. Only the most saintly and delusional among us welcomes *all* pain as challenge, perceives all loss as harsh blessing. I know that. I know that I’ve chosen a sport stuffed with long stretches of agony, that I belong to a small, eclectic community of men and women where status is calibrated precisely as a function of one’s ability to endure. Hallucinations and vomiting, to me and my fellow ultrarunners, are like grass stains to Little Leaguers. Chafing, black toenails, and dehydration are just the rites of passage for those of us who race 50 and 100 miles and more. A marathon is a peaceful prologue, a time to think and work out kinks. Ultrarunners often blister so badly they have to tear off toenails to relieve pressure. One ultrarunner had his surgically removed before a race, just in case, so he wouldn’t need to bother later on. Cramps don’t merit attention. Unless nearby lightning makes the hair on your arms and head stand up and dance, it’s nothing but scenery. Altitude headaches are as common as sweat and inspire approximately the same degree of concern (the death by brain aneurysm of one runner in a Colorado

race notwithstanding). Aches are either ignored, embraced, or, for some, treated with ibuprofen, which can be risky. Combined with heavy sweating, too much ibuprofen can cause kidney failure, which usually results in ghostly pallor and, if you're lucky, an airlift by helicopter to the nearest hospital. As an ultrarunner buddy and physician once said, "Not all pain is significant."

Ultrarunners take off at sunrise and continue through sunset, moonrise, and another sunrise, sunset, and moonrise. Sometimes we stumble from exhaustion and double over with pain, while other times we effortlessly float over rocky trails and hammer up a 3,000-foot climb after accessing an unknown source of strength. We run with bruised bones and scraped skin. It's a hard, simple calculus: Run until you can't run anymore. Then run some more. Find a new source of energy and will. Then run even faster.

Other sports take safety precautions, but in ultramarathons, we have death-avoiding precautions baked into the enterprise. Most ultras are dotted with aid stations, where runners are tracked, sometimes weighed, and provided with snacks, shade, and medical checkups. The majority of races also include pacers, who are allowed to accompany runners in latter sections of the course (but only for advice and to keep them from getting lost, not for carrying food or water). Ultrarunners can—much of the time—bring support crews, men and women who provide food, water, updates on competitors, and reassurance that you can, in fact, continue when you are sure you will collapse.

Nearly all ultras are run continuously, meaning that there is no point at which the clock stops and everyone gets to retire for a large plate of pasta and a well-deserved night's sleep, like competitors in the Tour de France do. That's part of the challenge and appeal of the event. You keep going in situations where most people stop. You keep running while other people rest.

But that was my problem—it was other people who stopped to rest. Not me. But now it was me. I simply couldn't go on.

My buddy and support crew member Rick was telling me he knew I could do it. He was mistaken. What had I done wrong? Was it my training and lack of recovery? Was it my race schedule? Had my mental approach been wrong? Was it what I had been eating? Was I thinking too much?

Ultramarathons give you plenty of time to think—that is, when you're not watching out for mountain lions, avoiding sheer drops, or responding to grinning rocks and gibbering trees (which your mind can't believe are mere phantasms). Stopping in an ultra, quitting, gives you even more time to ponder. But perhaps I wanted time to stop. Maybe I was meant to lie here on my back in the desert to question why I was running through an oven. Why was I subjecting myself to this torture?

I started running for reasons I had only just begun to understand. As a child, I ran in the woods and around my house for fun. As a teen, I ran to get my body in better shape. Later, I ran to find peace. I ran, and kept running, because I had learned that once you started something you didn't quit, because in life, much like in an ultramarathon, you have to keep pressing forward. Eventually I ran because I turned into a runner, and my sport brought me physical pleasure and spirited me away from debt and disease, from the niggling worries of everyday existence. I ran because I grew to love other runners. I ran because I loved challenges and because there is no better feeling than arriving at the finish line or completing a difficult training run. And because, as an accomplished runner, I could tell others how rewarding it was to live healthily, to move my body every day, to get through difficulties, to eat with consciousness, that what mattered wasn't how much money you made or where you lived, it was *how* you lived. I ran because overcoming the difficulties of an ultramarathon reminded me that I could overcome the difficulties of life, that overcoming difficulties *was* life.

Could I quit and not *be* a quitter?

"You've done it before," Rick said. "You can do it again."

I appreciated the optimism. I also appreciated its idiocy.

At another time, on another summer night, in another race, I might have gazed in wonder at the stars glittering against the velvety black night. I might have swiveled my head to peer at the snowy Sierra Nevada peaks looming like grouchy sentries on the edge of the endless desert and seen, not scowling defeat, but majesty. I would have moved toward the mountains' dark, disapproving bulk until it had transformed to welcome.

"My stomach," I moaned. "My stomach." A couple of my crew members suggested I should crawl into the coffin-sized, ice-filled cooler they had lugged up the road to get my core temperature down, but I had tried that already. Rick told me to put my feet in the air—that might help me feel better. He told me I should do it on the side away from the road so the other crews wouldn't be able to see me, because their reports would only embolden their runners. Didn't he realize that the other runners didn't need emboldening? The guy with the reputation wasn't going anywhere.

Not moving was actually pleasant. It wasn't nearly as shameful as I had imagined. It allowed me to ponder my hubris.

If it had been a movie, this was the place where I would close my eyes and hear the faint, strangled voice of my bedridden mother, telling me she loved me and that she knew I could do whatever I wanted, and I would have flushed with shame, and then I would have heard the authoritative voice of my father, telling me, "Sometimes you just do things!" I would have risen to my elbows, shut my eyes, and pictured all the middle school kids who had called me Pee-Wee, and they would have melted into all the naysayers who had questioned me at the beginning of my career, who said that I was nothing to worry about, I was nothing but a flatlander. In that movie I would have risen to my knees and suddenly remembered who I was—I was a runner!—and I would have pulled myself up, stood tall, and started walking, then loping, into the thick desert night, chasing down the two seasoned veterans in front of me as a wolf chases doomed field mice.

I tried to puke some more, but it was all dry heaving, the type that is excruciating with every empty pump of the stomach.

My crew and close friends told me to close my eyes and relax. Instead, I stared at the stars. Everyone and the desert disappeared. Loss of peripheral vision was one manifestation of dehydration and passing out. Was that what was happening? It was as if I was looking through a tunnel at a small circle in an infinite, glittery sky.

My crew told me to take some little sips of water, but I couldn't. I was thinking, "I don't think this is gonna happen," and then I heard a noise, and it was my voice saying what I was thinking: "I don't think this is gonna happen."

The stars didn't care. That's another pleasure of running an ultra: the absolute and soothing indifference of the land and the sky. So I made a mistake? It wasn't the worst thing in the world; the constellations weren't gossiping about me. Maybe this would help me with humility. Maybe droppin' out and being defeated would renew my spirit. Maybe cutting one race short was a good thing.

If only I could have made myself believe that.

Should I have listened to the trainers and doctors who said that athletes needed to fill their bodies with animal protein? Should I have trained less? I had thought I was invincible. I closed my eyes.

I had been schooled by nuns, raised by a mother who had been sprinkled with holy water from Lourdes, hoping it would help her rise from her wheelchair. Now it was me who couldn't rise.

I hadn't always been the fastest runner, but I had always considered myself one of the toughest. Maybe acceptance of my limits was the toughest thing of all. Maybe staying where I was wasn't weak but strong. Maybe accepting my limits meant it was time to stop being a runner, to start being something else. But what? If I wasn't a runner, who was I?

I looked again at the stars. They had no opinion on the matter.

Then, from the desert, a voice, an old familiar voice.

“You’re not gonna win this fucking race lying down in the dirt. C’mon, Jurker, get the fuck up.”

~~It was my old friend Dusty. That made me smile. He almost always made me smile, even when everyone around him was cringing.~~

“Get the fuck up!” Dusty yelled, but I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.

“Sweeney is out there dying, and you’re gonna take that dude. We’re gonna take that dude!”

I looked at my friend. Couldn’t he see that I wasn’t going to take anyone?

He squatted, folded himself until our faces were inches apart. He looked into my eyes.

“Do you wanna be somebody, Jurker? Do you wanna *be* somebody?”

## Rice Balls (Onigiri)

*I first saw these seaweed-wrapped rice packets when I asked a Japanese runner to show me what was in his race pack. I’m grateful I did, because white rice is a great food for cooling your body, especially in hot climates like Death Valley. It’s packed with carbohydrates, it’s not too sweet, and it’s soft and easy to digest. A great source for electrolytes and salt (via the seaweed), rice balls have always been a portable pick-me-up in Japan. These days, you can even find them at convenience stores in Asia. For a soy-free variation, substitute pickled ginger or umeboshi paste for the miso.*

2	cups sushi rice
4	cups water
2	teaspoons miso
3-4	sheets nori seaweed

Cook the rice in the water on the stovetop or using a rice cooker. Set aside to cool. Fill a small bowl with water and wet both hands so the rice does not stick. Using your hands, form ¼ cup rice into a triangle. Spread ¼ teaspoon miso evenly on one side of the triangle. Cover with another ¼ cup rice. Shape into one triangle, making sure the miso is covered with rice. Fold the nori sheets in half and then tear them apart. Using half of one sheet, wrap the rice triangle in nori, making sure to completely cover the rice. Repeat using the remaining rice, miso, and nori.

MAKES 8 ONIGIRI

## 2. “Sometimes You Just Do Things”

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### PROCTOR, MINNESOTA, 1980

The only line that is true is the line you're from.

—ISRAEL NEBEKER OF BLIND PILOT

I sat on a stool in our kitchen. My mother thrust a rough wooden spoon at me and told me to stir, but the batter was too thick. She told me to use both hands, but still I couldn't move the spoon. Suddenly it moved and kept moving. She had put her hands around mine. We made spirals of pale yellow out of sugar and butter, and I pretended I was doing it all by myself. It's one of my earliest memories.

I thought my mom was famous. She worked for the Litton Microwave company, showing women how to cook bacon and make chocolate cake with the new invention. The Minnesota Egg Council hired her to go on the radio to talk about eggs and that led to television commercials and that led to her own cable cooking show. Her motto (which I still believe): “You don't have to be a chef to cook great food.” For her family she roasted pork, baked chicken, broiled steak, and whipped up mashed potatoes from scratch. In the childhood of my memory, there was always a pie cooling on the kitchen windowsill, the scent of pastry and fruit stealing into our kitchen, enveloping my mother and me in its thick embrace.

I don't remember anyone talking about a primal connection to food, or how by eating the vegetables we grew we were connecting ourselves to the place where we lived and each other. I don't remember anyone remarking that the act of catching and cleaning and frying and eating walleye together was akin to a family sacrament. At my mother's insistence, we did sit down together for a full hour at dinner. If someone had praised her for baking cookies from scratch rather than using a mix, she would have thought they were nuts. I didn't know it, but I was learning a lot about food and its connection to love. When we cooked together, she told me stories about when she was in college, and said she knew I would go to college, too. When my dad wasn't around, she would ask me to grab my baseball bat, and she'd take me into the backyard, next to the garden, and she'd pitch underhand to me. She told me she was proud of what a hard worker I was and not to let Dad's grouchiness bother me. He just worried a lot.

My father wasn't the only disciplinarian in the family. When I misbehaved, my mom would spank me—with the same wooden spoon with which we stirred batter. She was the one who limited my television watching to 5 hours a week. If I wanted to watch a football game, she made me choose between the first or second half. I always chose the second half.

I can't remember the first time I saw her drop a jar. I must have been about nine. After a while, it was hard to remember when she didn't drop things. Knives trembled in her once-sure fingers. Sometimes, just standing by the counter, she would wince. If she saw me watching, she'd wink and smile.

Here's another memory: When I was six, stacking firewood outside, a car pulled up to our house. I knew it wasn't a neighbor; we lived on a dead-end road at the edge of a woods, 5 miles from Proctor, Minnesota, which was another 150 miles from Minneapolis. I knew all the cars on our road, who was driving, and which brothers and sisters were probably sitting in the back seat punching one another. This car belonged to a friend from Proctor. His mom had driven him out to play with me. I yelped and ran toward the car, but a stern voice stopped me.

“You can play when we're finished stacking wood. From the looks of it, we've got two more hours to go.”

It was Dad, and I knew better than to argue. So I whispered the news to my friend and he told his mom. She gave me a look, then gave my dad a look, and then they drove off. I went back to stacking wood.

When I was done with chores, on rare occasions my dad would take me for a walk in the woods. Once, when I was seven and my mom was taking a nap—she had been getting tired a lot—he picked up a handful of dirt and let it trickle through his thick fingers. He told me about the day that two of the smartest scientists in the world were walking in the woods—maybe woods just like these, right here in Minnesota—and God strolled up, right out of the trees. And God said, “If you guys are so smart, can you make dirt out of thin air, like I can?” I remember my dad smiling when he told me that story, but it was a sad smile. I think he was trying to tell me that no matter how hard a man thought or worked, some things in life would remain unknowable, and we had to accept that.

By the time I was eight, there were fewer walks in the woods with my dad. I was helping around the house a lot. I was pulling weeds from the big garden we had out back, or picking out rocks, or stacking wood, or helping in the kitchen, or making sure my sister, Angela, who was five, had a snack or that my brother, Greg, who was three, wasn't getting into mischief. By the time I was ten, I could cook a pot roast in the oven by myself. Whenever I complained that I didn't want to pick rocks or stack wood, I just wanted to go play, my dad would growl, “Sometimes you just do things!” After a while, I stopped complaining.

He tempered his discipline with compassion and a sense of fun. He would challenge me to see how much wood I could haul into our “wood room” in 10 minutes or how many rocks I could pick out of the garden in the same time. I don't think I realized it at the time, but he was teaching me that competition could turn the most mundane task into a thrill, and that successfully completing a job—no matter how onerous—made me feel unaccountably happy.

When I was ten my dad bought me a .22-caliber rifle with a polished walnut handle and a barrel made from burnished steel. He told me to kill any animal I wounded, to skin and gut it, to always eat whatever I brought home. I already knew how to catch a walleye and gut it and clean it.

I was a great blueberry picker, too. It was a rite of passage in my family that when you turned sixteen you got to go blueberry and cherry picking with Grandma Jurek. My older cousins had told me stories about the great adventure and I couldn't wait. My cousins had forgotten to mention the clouds of mosquitoes, or stinky bogs, or the beating sun, or the ladder, which I fell off. I cried and said I wanted to go home, but that didn't happen. Grandma Jurek had raised my dad. When you went cherry picking with her, you were picking for hours. And when you went fishing with Grandpa Jurek, if you got bored, too bad, you were gonna stay and fish. I learned patience while doing the tedious tasks, but more important, I learned to find joy in repetitive and physically demanding work.

I didn't always feel happy or patient, of course. I was a kid. But those were the times I kept going. Why?

*Sometimes you just do things!*

My dad was working two jobs then—during the day as a pipefitter and during the night in maintenance at the local hospital. I knew that the coupons Mom was using when I went with her to the grocery store were really food stamps, that we were getting government cheese, and that Dad was having trouble making ends meet. When our television broke, we didn't replace it for a year. We had two cars, but one was usually not working at all, and sometimes both. I knew that Mom was tired more and more and our garden next to the house was getting smaller while the list of chores my dad put on the fridge for us—a piece of paper with grids and the names and duties for me, my brother, and my sister—was getting bigger and bigger. I knew that none of my friends had to weed the garden and cut grass when it was 90 degrees and humid or haul and stack wood for 2 hours before they could play. My mom stopped pitching to me behind the house. I learned not to ask her.

The worse my mom got, the more I had to help. The more I helped, the more I wondered why things were the way they were. Why was my mom sick? When would she get better? Why couldn't my dad be less grumpy? Why did the school nurse always single me out for a second look at our regular head lice inspections? Was it because we lived in the country? Or because she thought we were poor?

Things got much worse the summer after third grade. It was a hot, clear Minnesota day. My dad had gotten off his shift, and he and my mom were coming to see me play baseball. I was in left field, and I had just caught a fly ball. I flung the ball toward the infield, and that's when I saw the Oldsmobile station wagon pull up and my father get out. The passenger door opened and my mother got out too, but something was wrong. The door was opening in slow motion. Then I saw her stumble and my father rush around the car to help her. He had to help her walk the 30 yards to the bleachers, and I watched each slow step. I missed two batters, and when the inning was over, I was still in left field, watching.

The chore list got bigger. We knew Mom was sick, and she took more and more naps. One day when I was in sixth grade my dad told us Mom was seeing some specialists. Maybe he said "multiple sclerosis," but if he did, they were just words. It didn't change who my mom was or what was happening to her. If I thought about it at all, it was along the lines of "Multiple what?" She would stay in Minneapolis for treatment from time to time. Dad said there was always hope.

One day, a physical therapist came to help Mom. It was an acknowledgment that her condition wasn't going to go away or be cured. She didn't see specialists after that.

I was cooking meatloaf and potatoes by then and chopping wood before I stacked it. I made lunches for my brother and sister and helped Mom get around the house. Sometimes I helped her with the exercises the physical therapist showed me.

I wish I could say something different, that I was grateful to be of service, that I appreciated the opportunity to help the woman who loved me, but the truth is, I hated the chores. I hated what was happening to my mom. None of us could say anything, though, because of my father, who had served in the Navy and believed in military discipline, and I know now that he was more stressed out than ever. *Don't ask why. Sometimes you just do things.* So my brother and sister, and especially I, basically lived in fear. Once, after I spent an hour stacking the wood, he said it was sloppy and knocked it down. Then I had to start over.

I began spending more and more time in the woods. I built trails and passageways to hidden tree forts with scrap wood left over from my father's projects. I took my rifle out every chance I could get and my fishing pole every other chance. Much of the time I went empty-handed, just me, and I walked under the cool green canopy until I knew every foot of those woods by heart.

I don't think they knew it at the time—and I certainly didn't—but my parents were training me to be an endurance athlete. By the time I started running, I knew how to suffer.

#### IN THE BEGINNING

Running efficiently demands good technique, and running efficiently for 100 miles demands great technique. But the wonderful paradox of running is that getting started requires no technique. None at all. If you want to become a runner, get onto a trail, into the woods, or on a sidewalk or street and run. Go 50 yards if that's all you can handle. Tomorrow, you can go farther. The activity itself will reconnect you with the joy and instinctual pleasure of moving. It will feel like child's play, which it should be.

Don't worry about speed at first or even distance. In fact, go slow. That means 50 to 70 percent of your maximum effort. The best way to find that zone is to run with a friend and talk while you're doing so. If you can't talk, you're running too fast and too hard. Do a combo of running and walking if needed. Don't be afraid to walk the uphill. Over time, add distance. Your

long, slow runs will strengthen your heart and lungs, improve your circulation, and increase the metabolic efficiency of your muscles.

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## Minnesota Mashed Potatoes

*As a child, I had a glass of milk with every meal and could pile mashed potatoes higher than anyone in my family. I still love the dish, but now I use homemade rice milk, which is just as creamy and rich as the stuff from cows, much less expensive, and doesn't produce any plastic container waste. There's no better comfort food.*

5-6 medium red or yellow potatoes  
1 cup rice milk (see recipe, below)  
2 tablespoons olive oil  
½ teaspoon sea salt  
½ teaspoon crushed black pepper  
Paprika (optional)

Wash the potatoes; peel or leave the skins on as you prefer. Place in a pot and add enough water to completely cover, 1 inch above the potatoes. Bring to a boil, covered, over high heat. Lower the heat and simmer for 20 to 25 minutes. Check the potatoes with a fork. If the fork goes into the potatoes easily, they are ready.

Remove from the heat and drain. Mash the potatoes with a potato masher or hand mixer. Add the remaining ingredients and continue to mash until a smooth, fluffy consistency is reached. Season with a dash or two more salt and pepper and paprika if desired.

MAKES 4-6 SERVINGS

## Rice Milk

1 cup cooked brown or white rice  
4 cups water  
½ teaspoon sea salt  
1 tablespoon sunflower oil (optional)

Combine the rice, water, and salt in a blender. If you want a creamier milk, add the oil. Blend on high for 1 to 2 minutes, until smooth. Pour into a container, cover, and refrigerate. Rice milk will keep for 4 to 5 days.

MAKES 5 CUPS

### 3. For My Own Good

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#### CARIBOU LAKE INVITATIONAL, 1986

You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you have.

—ANONYMOUS

I was just a fourth-grader, and I was trapped.

There were fourteen runners ahead of me and only twenty-five in the field. I was panting, cramped. Runners on either side of me swung their elbows, boxing me in. Others were on my heels, shoving. It was autumn, chilly. Leaves, deep red and orange, were carpeting the banks of Caribou Lake. Yellow flags marked the  $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile course, two laps around the baseball and soccer fields of Caribou Lake elementary school. I could see the puffs of warm air from the other runners clouding in the chilly north woods evening. I was wearing my maroon and gold St. Rose T-shirt and my long blue cotton pants, with shiny gold stripes down the side and elastic hems that my mother had sewed.

I couldn't play Little League anymore because that would have required a ride into town, and my dad was working too many hours to drive me. I couldn't play football because we couldn't afford the equipment. So I ran. I was tall and lean, and I didn't complain, so my school said I would be their representative in the school district meet. But I had never run as far as a mile before, and I wasn't fast. That's why, by the halfway mark of the race, I had fallen back to twentieth, out of twenty-five.

I kept running, though. I didn't ask why. I knew it was a useless question. *Sometimes you just do things!* And a couple of the elbow swingers next to me slid out of my peripheral vision. I kept running and I didn't feel anyone shoving me from behind. My cramps got worse and my panting turned to gasps, but I kept running and then smacked into a clot of kids in front of me, and a couple of them yelled, "Hey!" and then I broke from the pack. Then there were only five kids ahead of me. A quarter of a mile to go, and now there were four kids, then one.

I didn't win. The guy in front was way too fast. I couldn't envision ever being that fast. It would be a long time before I even thought about winning a race. But on that chilly afternoon I realized something. I realized that while most kids my age slowed down during a race and fell back, I made up ground. I seemed to gain strength.

By the time I entered middle school, sixth grade, I knew how to hold an egg between my forefinger and thumb so I could crack it with one hand. I could separate a load of white clothes from colored clothes, wash them, dry them, and fold them without a wrinkle in 60 minutes. I could do a hundred sit-ups in a row and run up and down the road three times without stopping (my brother and sister helped by sitting on my feet for the former and counting for the latter). I could cook spaghetti and pork chops and tuna noodle casserole and make wreaths from ground pine. (My brother and sister and I sold them for holiday money. We'd get five bucks for each one.) I could burp a baby and change a diaper, and I knew the principles of a basketball zone defense and the different motions needed to throw a perfect curveball. The first two I'd practiced on my brother and sister. The second two I knew from reading books in the library. I couldn't really play a lot on those teams—no transportation—but just in case, I wanted to know *how* to play.

At the beginning of seventh grade I wanted to be perfect. Part of that was because I saw my mom getting weaker and weaker and working harder and harder—on her exercises, on making sure all of us got nutritious meals, on creating little fun things for us to do around holidays: We had Mexican

wedding cakes and Christmas spritz cookies that came out of a cookie shooter that we would form in different shapes, dye with food coloring, and decorate with sprinkles. When it was my turn to dry the dishes, I wanted to be the fastest dryer in the family. When I rolled fresh walleye in breadcrumbs and fried it in butter, I wanted it to be the most delicious walleye anyone had ever tasted. I got good grades and worked hard for them, but that wasn't enough. I wanted the *best* grades, and even that wasn't enough. We had multiple-choice reading proficiency tests every month, and I wanted to be the first one finished. So did one of my best friends, Dan Hamski. He beat me every single time and it drove me crazy. It took me a while, but finally I figured out what was going on. He'd rip through the tests, and when he got to a question he couldn't answer, he just skipped it and moved on. If the same thing happened to me, I'd bear down and work on that question until I had figured it out, even if it took the rest of the allotted time. I never got anything wrong . . . but I never beat Dan. I had to get everything right, no matter what it cost.

The only place I didn't have to try so hard was the woods. There I could run, walk, or do whatever I wanted. The trees didn't care how hard I worked, whether I stacked wood the right way, or how fast I was. The sky wasn't depending on me to make sure my mom didn't get worse. The ground wasn't testing me. It was just me and the sighing wind and the silence. In the woods I was alone with my questions of why and the utter lack of answers. The lack didn't seem so frightening in the woods. I wanted to be a game warden. Years later, my parents showed me something I wrote that said I wanted to be a doctor, but I don't remember that. More likely, I just wanted my mom to get better.

We all did. But what could we do? It would have been nice to take my mom out for dinner, but meals out were only for birthdays or when dad got a raise. It would have been great for Mom to have a computer, and every year my dad would talk about buying one, but we never did. It wasn't until I was in eighth grade that he sprung for an Apple IIe.

I tried to help. I entered poster and coloring contests where the prize was twelve gallons of ice cream from Bridgeman's. I won that ice cream, and later I won poster contests sponsored by the state department of fish and game. That made my dad and mom happy. She was happy, but she was still tired all the time. "Mom has the flu," Dad would say, or "She really needs to rest today."

I had learned in school that if you put a frog in a pot of water, then gradually heat the water until it's hot enough to kill the frog, the animal won't move because he doesn't pay attention to gradual changes. That's how it was with me. It's not like one day my mom was great and then, after she got diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, everything sucked. Maybe even with a healthy mother and gentler father, I would have worried a lot. I'll never know.

At my annual checkup when I was twelve, the doctor took a deep breath when he read my blood pressure. He took it again and breathed even deeper. Then he told me to go sit in the waiting room and he whispered to my dad. After that, my dad took me to a specialist who took my blood pressure at least three times, sitting down, lying down, and standing up. He asked me how I was sleeping and if I ever felt faint, and I told him the truth, that I felt okay. But by the time I left I was scared—mostly because my dad looked scared, too.

When I got home, my dad told me to go outside and play—and that was particularly frightening because he *never* told me to play—while he and my mom talked. Then he called me in, and they told me that I was going to have to start taking some pills every morning.

"Why?" I hadn't said the word out loud in years.

"Your blood pressure is high," my mom said. "This might help."

I knew what taking pills meant because my mom took them every day. I said I wasn't going to take them, that I could lower my blood pressure myself. I would read some books on it. My mom smiled at that. I don't think I ever saw my dad look so helpless.

It wasn't just pills, they said. From now on, no more salt. That news was as bad as the pills. I

loved Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup, and that was out. I loved mounds of butter and piles of salt on mashed potatoes. Nix on that, too. (I hated vegetables, with a few exceptions, notably canned corn, raw carrots, and potatoes.)

I insisted. Really, I would study up, I could beat this thing. I pleaded for them to give me a chance. Of course they said no.

The next night after dinner, I saw the big white bag from the pharmacy with my name on it. It was sitting in the bathroom cabinet with all my mom's pills, and when my dad reached up for the bag and handed it to my mom, I started crying.

"Scottie," my mom said, "you have to take these. It's for your own good."

*Sometimes you just do things!* But *why?* I kept bawling and then I started screaming. She took the pills out of the bag and looked at me, then sighed and put them back.

"We'll try to figure something out, Scottie, but you have to cooperate a little bit."

The next week, my dad took me to another specialist. This doctor turned off the lights in his office and told me I should imagine somewhere where I was happy. I thought of the woods in the summer, the great green hush. He told me to close my eyes and to stay where I was—in the woods—and then after a while he turned on the lights and called my dad in.

"Your son can get his blood pressure down by himself," the specialist said. "If he can do it again at his pediatrician's office, we can wait on the medication."

That night my dad told me I didn't need to be so "wound up." He told me I should relax more, that I was just a kid, that I couldn't save the world. My dad, Mr. *Sometimes you just do things!*, was a complicated guy. He also told me that he had confidence in me, that I'd always been a good worker, and that he knew I could get my blood pressure down when we visited the pediatrician's office. I wasn't so sure. He promised that afterward he would buy me my own skis.

The next afternoon, at my pediatrician's office, I walked back into the woods, toward the green trees and the dirt and the quiet. Afterward, the doctor told my dad that he should hold on to the medicine but that I didn't need to start taking it. Not yet. He didn't say anything about stress or meditation or controlling your body with your mind, but I figured it out. Every week my parents would take out the inflatable blood pressure monitor they had bought and wrap it around my arm, and every week I would close my eyes and imagine trees and quiet. I learned that I could control my blood pressure with my brain. I remember thinking that talent might come in handy some day for something other than avoiding pills and getting to eat what I wanted.

I knew downhill skis were for rich kids, the kids who went to Duluth East, the ones whose parents were doctors and lawyers and who boarded planes to go on ski vacations. In my school, we called the people from that side of town "cake eaters." But my dad bought me those skis—used red, white, and blue K2s, used boots, and new poles—and even then I knew what a sacrifice it was.

That summer, my dad announced one night at dinner that the next week we were all going up to northern Minnesota to stay in a lodge. A lodge! He might as well have said we'd be going to Chicago to have a steak dinner. And not only that, but we would be at a lake and we could swim—in the lake next to the lodge or in the swimming pool—and fish and ride our bikes. There would be pontoon boat rides, too, and we could go by ourselves and paddle boat wherever we wanted on the lake. Angela and Greg and I felt as though we had won the lottery.

What my dad didn't tell us is that there would be other families there, and other kids, and professionals who would talk to all the kids while the adults met somewhere else.

The grownups brought the kids all together and asked us a series of questions. Questions like "How do you feel about your mom having MS?" And "What's it like at home? How do you feel about your friends and schoolmates visiting?" And "Do you feel different?" I was already reading a lot then—about blood pressure and soccer and even cooking. But I hadn't read anything about multiple

sclerosis. I knew all I needed to know about it. Angela and Greg didn't say anything to the social worker—they were shy, anyway, and I think they were scared. I didn't say much either. No one in my family talked much about things like that. What good would it have done? What would it have helped I had learned by then that all the whys in the world wouldn't change what was happening to my mother. I didn't start crying or anything, like some of the other kids there. My sister just stared at the social worker. My little brother, who was already becoming a handful, kept tugging at me, asking when we were going to go back to the paddle boats. He was a badass even then.

The truth is, I don't remember feeling much at that moment. It was like, "Mom has MS, tough luck, that's the way it is. You just keep going."

## Lentil-Mushroom Burgers

*For any reluctant vegan who worries that nothing will ever replace the taste or texture of a juicy beef patty, consider the lentil burger. It might not matter so much that lentils are an excellent source of protein, that they are one of the fastest-cooking legumes, or that they are consumed in large quantities all over Europe, Asia, and Africa (even Idaho!). What will impress you is how tender, juicy, and "meaty" they taste. I grew up grilling over campfires, and I know burgers. These are as delicious as they come. Sometimes I'll even take a few patties with me on long training runs and races.*

- 1 cup dried green lentils (2¼ cups cooked)
- 2¼ cups water
- 1 teaspoon dried parsley
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1¼ cups finely chopped onion
- ¾ cup finely chopped walnuts
- 2 cups fine bread crumbs (see Note)
- ½ cup ground flax seed (flax seed meal)
- 3 cups finely chopped mushrooms
- 1½ cups destemmed, finely chopped kale, spinach, or winter greens
- 2 tablespoons coconut oil or olive oil
- 3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 2 tablespoons nutritional yeast
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ½ teaspoon paprika

In a small pot, bring the lentils, water, parsley, 1 garlic clove, and ¼ cup of the onion to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, partially covered, for 35 to 40 minutes, until the water is absorbed and the lentils are soft.

While the lentils are cooking, combine the walnuts, bread crumbs, and flax seed in a bowl. Add the nutritional yeast, salt, pepper, and paprika and mix well.

Sauté the remaining onion, remaining garlic, the mushrooms, and greens in the oil for 8 to 10 minutes, then set aside. Remove the lentils from the heat, add the vinegar and mustard, and mash with a potato masher or wooden spoon to a thick paste.

In a large mixing bowl, combine the lentils, sautéed veggies, and bread crumb mixtures, and mix

well. Cool in the refrigerator for 15 to 30 minutes or more.

~~Using your hands, form burger patties to your desired size and place on waxed paper. Lightly fry~~  
in a seasoned skillet, broil, or grill until lightly browned and crisp, 3 to 5 minutes on each side. Extra  
uncooked patties can be frozen on wax paper in plastic bags or wrapped individually in aluminum foil  
making for a quick dinner or wholesome burger for the next barbecue.

MAKES A DOZEN 4-INCH DIAMETER BURGERS

NOTE: To make the bread crumbs, you'll need about half of a loaf of day-old bread (I use Ezekiel 4:9).  
Slice the bread, then tear or cut into 2- to 3-inch pieces and chop in a food processor for 1 to 2  
minutes, until a fine crumb results. The walnuts can also be chopped in the food processor with the  
bread.

## 4. “Pain Only Hurts”

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### TO ADOLPH STORE AND BACK, 1990

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

—LAO-TZU

It turned out those secondhand skis would take me places.

I liked sports but had avoided the school teams in middle school. Only twelve of us had graduated from the sixth-grade class at St. Rose, and even though I would have liked to play football or basketball on the middle school team, the thought of getting on the late bus with a whole lot of older, athletic kids scared me. I was shy and I was skinny, and other kids called me “Pee-Wee.” Kids pushed and shoved me and challenged me to fights on the school bus. I think it was because my mom always made me wear a button-down shirt to school. Probably because word got around that I did well in class, too. Studying hard at a northern Minnesota redneck school was not cool. If they had known how much I hunted and fished, it might have been different. But they didn’t, and it wasn’t.

Once a guy on the bus spit in my face. But I didn’t fight. I knew no matter what happened—whether I won or, much more likely, got beat up—I would get it worse from my dad when I got home.

I played basketball in our church league when I was in seventh and eighth grades because the travel and uniforms were taken care of (and church league teammates aren’t exactly known for stealing anyone’s lunch money), and even though I knew all about trapping zone defenses and backdoor picks, I wasn’t anything special. What I remember most about those basketball games is how my mom needed help getting to the bleachers. I hated seeing that. It sounds awful to say, but I hated how slow she moved. I felt as if we were a really odd family and I was a really odd kid because of that. At church, we all sat up front. My dad would drop us off and say, “You kids go up and get seats and I’ll bring Mom in.” So everyone in the church got to watch our mom shuffle to the front of the church.

By the time I was a sophomore, I had good grades, a part-time job at the Dry Dock Bar & Grill (where I had been promoted from dishwasher to short-order cook), and not a lot of friends. I could cook shrimp and French silk pie, chili, burgers, clam chowder, and a kick-ass Philly cheesesteak. Something was burning in me, but I don’t think I’d call it ambition. It was too vague, too shapeless. I still wanted to know why things were happening the way they were. I wanted to know what I would become. Concentration had helped me in every activity of my life, but it didn’t help me find those answers. I wasn’t sure what would.

It was the skis. My high school formed a boys cross-country ski team when I was a sophomore, and because I liked being outside and figured I wasn’t going to be a star point guard or tailback, I joined. The coach, a tough Norwegian named Glen Sorenson, showed us some fundamentals, took us to meets where we piled up losses, and ordered us to spend the summer before our junior year building our endurance. He said that he didn’t care how we did it as long as we did it. I didn’t own a road bike or inline skates, so I ran.

If my shift at the Dry Dock started early, I’d run in the afternoon. If I had to help my mom in the afternoon, I’d run at night. I’d go a little farther each day. One day I made it 4 miles out and 4 back, and my dad said, “You ran out to Adolph Store!” He and my mom were both blown away.

I didn’t run because it always felt good. My muscles ached, I had blisters, and I was having to go to the bathroom on the run—that was the summer I learned about the runner’s trots (cramps, gastrointestinal distress, and the urgent need to move your bowels). That was the summer I got honked

at and run off the roads of northern Minnesota. I enjoyed the sense of movement and progress, discovering that I could reach places on my own without anyone driving me. But that's not why I kept running. I ran because I wanted to ski.

Coach Sorenson told us stories about how he and his brother would go up to the Arctic Circle and fish from canoes for weeks. He also told stories of chasing deer on foot until they (the deer) collapsed from exhaustion. Coach Sorenson was one of the only people I had ever met who asked why as relentlessly as I had and then explained the answers. Why alternate sprints with distance training? Why move your arms one way and not another? Why lag back rather than take the lead early? Coach was usually asking the questions and providing the answers, but if one of us asked something he didn't know, he seemed even happier. Knowing pleased him not nearly as much as wondering. Finally, a place where—and a man who—I could ask why.

To call our team motley would have been a lavish compliment. Duluth had three school districts. There were the cake eaters on the East Side, and in the middle were the greasers, the city kids, the ones who hung out on street corners and who we were sure carried switchblades and pulled stickups. Then there was us, the poor kids, so far out of town that we weren't even technically part of the Duluth school district. The tough redneck kids.

There was Jon Obrecht, whose parents thought sports built character, and the Szybnski brothers, Mark and Matt, who were both around 6-foot, 225. They wore tights and long baggy shorts over them. They looked like a cross between linebackers and ballerinas. And there was lanky me. Before Coach Sorenson, not one of us had ever been on cross-country skis before.

We might not have been as experienced as the other teams, and we definitely weren't as well equipped, but we were focused. Coach had only three commandments: Be in shape. Work hard. Have fun. They were the perfect fundamentals for a bunch of poor redneck Minnesotans. His motto was, "Pain only hurts."

Other teams had bigger squads and nicer uniforms, but we'd show up in our blue jeans and flannel shirts, and by the time I was a junior we'd kick their asses. Or at least some of their asses. The cake eaters at Duluth East were in a different class than everyone else. They wore red Lycra uniforms and each one of them carried two or three pairs of skis. They were our version of the Evil Empire, or the New York Yankees, or whatever group was rich and powerful and had everything they ever wanted but wanted more. They showed up at meets in privately hired buses. Of course we hated them.

I was probably the best skier on our team then, and a lot of it was because of all the endurance and fitness base I had built up running. We did interval training on the skis—racing up hills—and Coach Sorenson told me it was the first time anyone younger than him had ever beaten him. He seemed happy about it.

It wasn't just our team that was winning. I started collecting individual prizes that season. My parents would come to the meets, and because they took place in the woods, my dad built a sled. He'd put my mom in it and wrap her up in a sleeping bag and put big mittens on her hands, and he'd pull her so she could watch me. That felt good.

I was ranked fifteenth best cross-country skier in the state, and my dad had found steady work as a boiler operator at the University of Minnesota—Duluth. Even though my mom needed a wheelchair now, and even though I still had to stack wood and do the laundry and cook and clean, I had learned that if *sometimes you just do things*, well, sometimes things worked out.

The trouble was, sometimes they didn't. One day in March, I drove my brother and sister over to our great-grandmother's to take her out for lunch and shopping. When we got home, my mom was lying on the floor. She had fallen when she was trying to get up from the toilet, and she had broken her

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