

NORTH FORK TRAIL
WALKER PARK 2
TRAIL END

NOW

GO HOME

SOUTH FORK TRAIL
RAINBOW LAKE →
BENCH CREEK →
STEHEKIN ROAD →

**WILDERNESS, BELONGING, AND
THE CROSSCUT SAW**

STEHEKIN RIVER TRAIL
DEVORE CREEK TRAIL
WEAVER POINT CAMP

ANA MARIA SPAGNA

Long Distance



We wanted to run. That's why we'd come. We had our sneakers and our N.F.L. striped kneesocks, all of us kids he'd recruited himself from different elementary schools. But Coach Halpin would have none of it. He lined us up by height along the bike racks, and since I was the smallest, I was closest to him.

"Lean forward," he said and lunged with his front leg bent and his back leg straight. "Stretch your calf."

I didn't know that word yet. I pictured a baby cow. I mimicked Coach Halpin's pose, leaning forward so the top of the bike rack tucked under my chin guillotine-style, and I studied the man beside me. Though his legs were skinny and sprouted grey whiskery hairs, his muscles—quads, hamstrings, calves, so many new words—roped one around the other, trimly, and bulged in places I never expected. I admired his legs, and thought, since he was so danged serious about it, that stretching must have been how they got that way. I aspired to it. I lunged forward, eyes scrunched tight in concentration, wishing with all my might for great stony knobs to appear behind my shins.

"That's good," Coach Halpin said.

He was chewing gum, this muscled man, and he smiled at me, and I was in love like only an eight-year-old girl can be.

"You were made for distance," Coach said a couple weeks later. "You're a natural."

I knew what he really meant: that I was not fast, but I followed directions well. At practice each day we stretched then took a long slow lap around Hunt's Park: the ball fields, the swimming pool drained for winter, the playground with the spaceship monkey bars.

I heeled at Coach's side, always, while the other kids raced ahead full-bore like labs off leash, like I would have wanted to if I hadn't been so busy staring at Coach.

"You'll be a miler," he said.

"O.K.," I said.

Coach wore a nylon U.C.L.A. tank that showed off his arms—biceps, triceps!—and a Marine Corps tattoo. My dad had been a Marine so I recognized the logo, but my dad didn't have the tattoo, or the muscles. He'd played football in college, but now he usually lay on the couch with a beer watching television. We watched the Montreal Olympics together, Dad and I, and I did the math. I would achieve greatness in Moscow when I would be twelve, then repeat the feat in '84 when I'd be sixteen, then I'd retire.

I attended practice regularly, fanatically, even when practice moved from Hunt's Park out to the fringes of town where instead of lawn and sidewalk we ran on hard-packed dirt. We followed fire roads along irrigation canals into orange groves and up desert foothills where deep eroded ruts snaked toward me threatening to snap my ankles as I strained for the crest on my tiptoes. I felt my heart pounding, and I wheezed toward the summit where Coach Halpin waited, chewing his gum.

"That's good," he would say. And I would swoon.

At home, I checked the progress of my calves in the bathtub, and seeing no marked improvement, I pestered my dad into jogging with me on the weekends. He drove me to Hunt's Park in his Pinto, and he smoked a cigarette while I stretched. Then he slogged beside me on my long tedious turtle-paced lap, wearing red shorts that were too tight and too short and a bandanna tied Torto-style around his balding head, and I would have been embarrassed except that I couldn't do it without him. If I was going to be a great Olympic champion, I'd need every advantage I could get, and Dad stayed with it, against all odds, plodding beside me week after week in plain view of normal families playing and picnicking and lounging on the grass. Sometimes we stopped at Dairy Queen on the way home.

After a while, Dad became sort of the unofficial assistant coach. He couldn't always make practice because of work, but he came to the Saturday meets. The distance races came last, so I had time to kill, hours of it, and I spent that time stretching and gawking at Coach's legs. My dad stretched with me for as long as he could, leaning out over his belly, reaching for his toes—loitering like the nice boy who has a crush on you and follows you around like a lost puppy, but whom you will never love, never in a million years—until duty called. His job was to wrangle kids back to the track when they inevitably wandered off. Those kids were not, in my view, serious runners. Not like Coach Halpin wanted us to be. They were sprinters after all, who spent ten seconds on the track, then the rest of the morning goofing around. My dad joked with them as they swung from the bleachers and searched for lost balls outside the tennis court fence. He would have liked me to join them, I think. But I would not stray. I stretched alone on the chalky football field through so many races—the 100's then 220's then 440's then 880's—waiting. When at last the starters called the mile, I toed the starting line at the farthest end, the slowest runners' spot, and I craned my neck to make sure Coach Halpin was watching. He always was. He leaned out from the bleachers with a palm-sized silver stopwatch on a string around his neck while I ran, pumping my fists furiously, willing myself through one excruciating lap then the next.

"Kick," he hollered for the last hundred yards or so. "Kick for the finish!"

And by god I kicked.

"Doing good," my dad hollered. "That's my girl," he said.

And I cringed.

I lost races by dramatic margins, trailing the leaders by a full five minutes, usually getting lapped in a one-mile race, and there my dad would be at the finish line with a hug. No chastisement. No technical hints for improvement. My dad seemed destined to be one lousy Olympic parent. He seemed too laid back. After the meet he'd take my hand to walk across miles of parking lots to the

Pinto, and I'd turn for one last fleeting look at Coach Halpin the way a girl in a movie does to signal to the audience the plot to come, the plot they know by heart: that eventually she will leave one boy for another.

A few years later, when I was a teenager lying on my bedroom floor listening to Jackson Browne and rehashing the mysteries of love, I decided Coach Halpin had been my first. My first love and, as it turns out, my first heartbreak. I had adored him, had wanted so badly to impress him, and one day when I least expected it, everything changed.

It was September when Coach Halpin invited me to a cross-country race, something entirely new, in the mountains. He and his wife owned a cabin at Lake Arrowhead, he told my parents, and they wondered if I might join them for the weekend. It was a big deal. I didn't often leave home overnight. I ran the race in the morning after a brief rain squall, pounding along the highway through the glistening pines, my feet slapping the wet pavement as the sun broke through the trees at intervals and splintered into separate blinding rays. I ran into sunlight and back out again alone, the very last runner at the back of the pack, and Coach Halpin stood at the end of the ribboned finish chute to congratulate me. Right then, I was still happy to see him.

After the race, we drove through the woods to his cabin, which I had pictured as magical, palatial even, and entered a too-small house littered with mismatched folding chairs and dog-eared copies of *Readers Digest*. The trouble had begun. His wife prepared a soup with an unpleasant foreign smell for dinner—lentils, I think they were—and I found a bay leaf in my bowl, a hard inedible thing afloat on brothy mush. Then Coach changed out of his running shorts, and I didn't like seeing him that way. Regular clothes made him look old, I thought, and shabby, less than what he ought to be. I swallowed my soup as best I could and waited for dessert that never came. Then, the final straw, they switched on the television, and we watched the Miss America Contest. Girls swaggered across

the screen in their swimsuits, and to me they looked distinctly weak—sissies, sissies, sissies!—undeserving of attention, particularly attention from Coach Halpin. I tried to feign interest, tried at least to keep my eyes open, but I failed. I was exhausted.

Sometimes I think it was tiredness, finally, that caused everything to change. But it wasn't just that. There was a new hardness in me when I woke in that strange house. I missed the softer spot, the wanting. I had loved Coach Halpin, not this musty-house man with the strange food and the TV girls. On the way back home, I got carsick and threw up all over the backseat.

As a teenager, I turned the hurt over and over in my mind, examining it like a cleverly wrapped present, like an obsession. Nothing had happened, nothing at all, but everything had changed, and I wanted to know why. I wanted to make sense of it because I feared, rightly, it was the kind of thing that might happen to me again: one day love, next day nausea. It might happen to anyone, at any time, without warning, and because of that, it seemed inevitable and maddeningly unreasonable. I told myself it was the worst kind of hurt that you could experience or cause. I was wrong.

I kept running for a while out of habit, I suppose, and Dad would come after work to pick me up. He brought a stopwatch, and sometimes he brought his shorts and ran with us, though he did not stay long in the back of the pack with me. He charged ahead with the older kids, the eighth-grade boys that Coach Halpin allowed to join us then, near the end of my short-lived career, with the shadow of mustaches on their lips and gigantic formless quadriceps. Dad had, by then, lost some weight and quit smoking and bought a shelf full of books about running. He was training for a half-marathon. In hindsight, I guess I can see that he had grown a little fanatical. At the time, I didn't think about him much.

One afternoon my mom dropped me off. She had given me special dispensation from my religious education classes so I wouldn't miss practice. That's how serious it had become. I stood on the curb as she pulled away, then I dawdled as I weaved through

