

Girl on the Run

Sarah Tucker Redux



A NOVEL BY JIM KNOEDEL

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GIRL ON THE RUN – SARAH TUCKER REDUX

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This book is dedicated to athletes I coached whose lives ended much too soon. They are gone but not forgotten.

Brian Casey
Jennifer Darrow
Crista Fabrycki
Jennifer Goebel
Jim Janak
Monieka Thompson
Diana Wight

Title IX

“No person shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

June 23, 1972

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Chapter 1

August 22, 1982

I sat on the giant boulders along the Lake Michigan shoreline, the blocks of limestone stacked in random piles at the water's edge, staring eastward across the water at clouds hovering low over the lake, trying to digest my first weekend on the Northwestern campus. My roommate was taking a nap but I was restless, walking across campus, drawn towards the water without thought.

Cross country camp officially began Monday the 23rd, our first meet at UW-Parkside in three weeks, classes for the first quarter not getting underway until Thursday September 23rd. I was grateful to focus on running before the schoolwork began, my concern about the demands of classes more unnerving than any worry about running.

In early August I got the news Coach Capriotti was leaving and Mike O'Shea would be taking his place, the change was quite a shock so close to the cross country camp. We didn't know a thing about him other than he was twenty-nine and ran at Michigan. I worried he wouldn't want me, possibly cutting my athletic scholarship – even though mom and dad claimed it wouldn't happen. But you never know.

Jennifer Hernandez was my roommate at Hobart House, the dignified 3-story dormitory like a fifty-year-old dowager – elegant but old. And I mean old. We bought matching bedspreads, managing to fit a small loveseat along the window for any sleepovers, pinning posters of Chariots of Fire and Richard Gere in "American Gigolo" on blank walls, a purple African violet on my desk and a macrame plant hanger I knotted from twine dangling from the curtain rod, the spider plant desperately in need of water.

Later that afternoon, I walked to Giordano's with Jennifer to meet the rest of the team, Coach O'Shea waving us over as we circled through the revolving door, nervously smiling as we

approached our new teammates. I was excited but scared, clinging to Jennifer as though we were attached at the hip, both of us worried about being accepted by the girls. And by our new coach. He hadn't recruited us.

My concerns were all for nothing, our teammates treating us like old friends, already making plans for activities on campus and trips into Chicago before school began. Coach O'Shea was personable and dynamic, his enthusiasm inspiring everyone, expressing to Jennifer and me that he was excited to have us on the team.

After we finished eating he went over the schedule, new 1982 NCAA rules, times for physicals, and then jumped into the day to day routine.

"Until school begins on September 23rd we'll meet each morning...except Sunday, at 9am at Anderson Hall. Some days we'll go off campus, others we'll do workouts around here. Bill Jarvis, the equipment manager will hand out practice gear and give you a locker after Monday morning's practice...so tomorrow come dressed to run."

He looked around the table after finishing his talk.

"Any questions?"

Anita Keller smiled and waved her hand like a second grader.

"Hey Mike. Coach. Is it true you're going to take us shopping at Old Orchard after we get lockers?"

Everyone broke out laughing, the grin on Anita's face telling us she was joking...sorta.

Monday morning Jennifer and I jogged the half mile to Anderson Hall from our dormitory, Becky Beach and Joanne Sloan already sitting in the grass when we arrived. Becky shaded her eyes with a hand and smiled.

"Good morning. Did you two think to bring a dry tee shirt? You're going to need it. The woods are always steamy and you'll sweat like a stuck pig."

Jennifer and I twisted sideways, the profile of our backpacks answering her question.

"If you gotta pee, do it now." Joanne pointed at the hallway. "There's one in Anderson Hall. They have portable toilets on

the trails but you don't want to use them – no toilet paper and they're all gross.”

We both shook heads. From behind us Anita approached at a jog, wearing a black t-shirt with a headshot of Debbie Harry, her sleeves haphazardly removed with scissors, smiling when she slowed to a stop after hearing Joanne's statement.

“So which of you two.” Anita pointed back and forth between Jennifer and me. “Has taken a nature pee?”

We all laughed, my hand creeping into the air, a blush filling my cheeks.

“So do you use the squat technique or...”

Her head turned, tossing a quick wave to Coach O'Shea as he burst through the Anderson Hall door like he was late for a meeting - Janelle, Alice, and Terry trailing right behind. He was carrying an orange Gatorade cooler and a sleeve of cups, the tilt of his shoulders indicating the container was certainly full. Anita grinned and covered laughter with a hand, winking at me as she took a sip from her water bottle.

“Okay, okay, enough chatter ladies.” He jiggled the van keys. “Let's load up.” Coach turned to Anita. “I see you already picked up your practice gear.” He rolled his eyes at her shirt, unlocking the van so we could jump in.

The dirt trail in Glenview meandered alongside the Des Plaines River, the path wide enough we could run in groups of two and three, chatter running continuous at first, petering out as the heat began to overwhelm us – in spite of the shade provided by huge oak and cottonwood trees. I enjoyed the setting, through a break in the trees spotting a blue heron standing still in a shallow part of the river, waiting for a guileless fish to swim by.

On the ride to the trail I was a bit nervous, afraid I would get buried by the workout tempo, but after Coach O'Shea told us no faster than 7:30 pace my worries disappeared. This was my first opportunity to show them I was made of the right stuff.

As we ran through the forest the steady rhythm of foot strikes was hypnotic, my mind drifting to the conversation with mom at Dane's Dairy last June. I knew she wanted to spend more time with me before I left for school in August, though a

bit surprised when she spoke the unspoken words about Thorsten which I had been thinking of for weeks.

“I think Thorsten is a great boy. He’s polite, very motivated, and has a good head on his shoulders.” Mom smiled. “And if I was your age, I wouldn’t mind having him on my elbow.” She burst into laughter.

I rolled my eyes.

“But we need to talk about you two getting intimate.”

I blushed, turning side to side to make sure no one overheard, more embarrassed by her words than I was by the awkwardness of the subject she was broaching. It was as if she could read my mind. Recently, I had been thinking about it much more, wondering if I was ready. Wondering if this was the time. That Thorsten was the one.

“First, I want to remind you to always keep me in the loop. I’m on your side...no matter what.” The way she looked at me I could read the words that she didn’t say. That she didn’t want me getting pregnant.

“Second, I don’t want you having intercourse but also realize everything in your body is saying how badly you want to. So if you need birth control pills tell me. We’ll get them when you want. It’s your decision...just don’t wait until it’s too late.” She put her hand over mine and squeezed it. “But if you can wait...please do. The intimacy changes some boys...has an effect on relationships that even I failed to realize.”

I looked up into her eyes, the openness of her words shocking. She pursed her lips and nodded.

“You’re young. I’m not saying Thorsten isn’t the one...but you need to think about where your paths are going. He has three more years in Missouri and you have four in Chicago. The two campuses are four hundred miles apart and your weekends will be busy with cross country and track. A long distance relationship is much harder than you think...I know.” Her head dropped. “So.” She smiled. “Let me know what you decide.”

We stood and embraced for an extra beat, mom finishing with a kiss on the top of my head.

Now the summer is gone. Memories of camping with Thorsten our last weekend were still fresh in my mind. It made my heart ache. *How was I ever going to survive our separation?* That evening we sat around the campfire and stared into the flames, his arms around me as I leaned back into his body, feeling so contented – like I had died and gone to heaven.

Thorsten left for his internship at the *Daily Tribune* in Columbia in early July, running miles the only thing filling my aching heart, a final trip to Knoxville in August for the 1982 AAU meet merely something to divert the sadness. My boyfriend was gone.

At Saturday's practice we drove to Swallow Cliff forest preserve to get miles on the dirt trails in the southwest suburbs, pulling into the parking lot and everyone climbing out, the team looking at a hill three times the size of Evanston's Mt. Trashmore – the hill we ran repeats on last Tuesday.

"Holy shit." It was Anita. "This hill is like Trashmore on steroids." Her eyebrows rose.

"See those chutes." Becky pointed at the u-shaped tubes. "They're for toboggans. The chutes are longer than a football field...supposedly you can get up to fifty miles an hour."

"Hey Mike...coach." Anita grinned. "Do you think we could bring out roller skates next time?"

Coach O'Shea rolled his eyes.

"Okay ladies. We're doing the eight mile loop. Keep in mind that you'll climb to the top of this hill at the two mile mark." He pointed to the top. "So be smart – keep the pace easy." He nodded at the portable toilets. "If anyone needs one stop in now and then we'll get started." Becky jogged in that direction carrying a roll of toilet paper.

The dirt trail snaked through groves of maples, cottonwoods, and ash trees, conversation lively as we approached a small stream, flat rocks placed strategically so we could traverse it without getting wet. At least theoretically.

Joanne led the way, her long legs easily navigating the improvised crossing, the rest of us following behind in single file, Janelle slipping off the last stone into ankle-deep water, her hands muddied as she landed on the far slope. I was

surprised she was the only one. Most distance runners are klutzes.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” It was impossible for us not to laugh at Janelle. “Wait. I gotta wring out my sock.”

We resumed running after Janelle re-tied her shoe, ten minutes later the team discovering the climb up to the top was at hand. Initially the slope was easy, but after the first switchback the hill got steeper, everyone’s breaths much deeper, our strides no longer than a yardstick.

After a torturous minute I looked up with hopeful thoughts but the hill continued, another switchback only prolonging the agony. I have no idea how much longer we climbed, my mind numbed by tired legs, and rapid respiration, the trail finally leveling out at a clearing. *Thank God.*

The rest of the six miles was filled with small ups and downs, in many areas glacial rocks embedded in the dirt trail dictating we keep eyes on the ground. I was so relieved when we finally arrived back at the sledding hill, my t-shirt soaked in sweat, and eyelids crusty with salt. From the looks on faces, my teammates were just as happy to be done. I checked my Timex watch as I drank a cup of water. We started sixty-eight minutes ago.

“Okay ladies. One trip up the stairs.” Coach pointed. “And we’re done.” We all moaned.

Twenty minutes later the eight of us were relaxing in the water of a Northwestern alum’s backyard pool, Coach O’Shea talking with Mr. Brennan as they grilled hamburgers, the cool water the most wonderful feeling in the world. If I was to die at this moment, nothing would have left me more at peace than this blissful sensation – well, except a cheeseburger, some potato salad, and slices of watermelon. Oh, and a cherry popsicle. I had that and more.

I slept all the way back to campus.

Beginning with the Monday of Labor Day, we spent the rest of the week just over the Wisconsin border at a Girl Scout camp, putting in miles on the Ice Age Trails in the mornings, some days getting our intervals in on quiet county roads, cows staring at us as we ran back and forth on each repetition. It was

amusing to watch heads follow us, many of the girls making faces at them as we passed by.

That day we did twelve 400m repeats from point to point, coach riding alongside us on a girl's bicycle he found at camp, shouting encouragement as we ran, his presence like a persistent fly. By the eighth one my breathing was ragged, sweat dripping down my temples at a steady pace, dry areas on bras outlining the spots where we weren't yet drenched.

I did the ninth and tenth ones as though on autopilot, simply following the girls without thought of my fatigue, the eleventh one eliciting the first affirmation. *C'mon Sarah. You can do it. Be tough.* I don't know how I kept the jog going between intervals – but I did, the challenges from teammates a wonderful motivation. We were side by side on the last one, eight bodies filling both lanes of the county road as our distance to the cone disappeared.

I was so glad to be done.

It was clear we had a good team. The talent level of these girls far exceeded that of my high school teammates. In fact, even in the state of Iowa. Nothing less than my best effort would keep me abreast of them, their daily efforts on the hard workouts a welcome challenge – what I was looking forward to when I arrived at college.

It was weird not being the team leader, the one all the girls looked to for direction each day. But to be honest, it was wonderful to let someone else take charge. To leave all the leadership to the juniors. We spent afternoons swimming in the small pond at the Girl Scout camp, playing shuffleboard, badminton, and croquet, some of the girls playing cribbage or euchre for a change of pace.

Each evening finished with the team sitting on chairs around a campfire making s'mores. I always took charge of building the fire, getting Jennifer to help me find sticks to hold everyone's marshmallows.

"Sarah Crockett over there." Anita nodded at me with a big grin. "Plans on catching a raccoon tonight and skinning it, so we can grill it for lunch tomorrow."

"I get dibs on the coonskin cap." Janelle smirked as she raised her hand.

“You seemed to like the blueberries and strawberries I found in the woods.” I smiled. “So I thought you’d like to try something new. Being the city girl you are, the only place *you* could find a blueberry is at a grocery store.” Everyone burst into laughter.

The rest of the week went by so quickly, comfort with my new teammates growing day by day.

We still hadn’t had a class before our first meet at UW-Parkside on September 11th, the hilly course one I was quite familiar with. It’s where I qualified for my first Kinney Championship in San Diego. Where I ran 17:50 as a sophomore at East High. One that always gave me comfort.

I stared out the van window from the seat behind coach as we drove northward on I-94 towards Wisconsin, lazily watching the sites and scenes. A roller coaster climbing the rails at Great America, hands going up as riders crested the initial hill, a few minutes later Coach O’Shea tossing change into the tollway basket near the Wisconsin border. “Hey look.” Anita pointed out the sign as we crossed into Wisconsin, laughing at the words “Bong State Recreation Area” before we turned off the highway towards the Kenosha course.

I wanted so badly to make this first race a memorable one, a performance that would set the stage for an illustrious career. Get me off to a good start. Too many good high school runners had succumbed to factors they were unprepared for or unaware of when they started college. Returned home with a hangdog look that aged their faces.

They didn’t acknowledge real issues - the “freshmen fifteen” gained in the dining hall, dorms which were so loud it was impossible to fall asleep before midnight, or the foolish investment in campus social life (aka a boyfriend or sororities) that conflicted with success. I didn’t want to be another one of those failures.

And then there was school. Last summer dad spoke with me about the importance of study habits while we sat on the patio, waiting for the grill to heat up for the burgers.

“Think of it like you do training. Only a fool would practice three days a week and skip the others. I guarantee that plan would fail. It’s the same with studies. Two to three hours six days a week will get you further than two all-nighters. Be consistent. Do a little bit often.” I cut in.

“Yeah, but I’m worried about how smart everyone is.” I sighed. “I mean, 100 percent of the students were in the National Honor Society...more than likely all of them valedictorians. So I’m just another face.” Dad could hear my exasperation. He held up his hand.

“Honey, mom and I will love you no matter how you do...even if the semester yields a 1.50.” He smiled. “But please keep it a little higher.” His grin was much bigger. “I think a reasonable goal is to focus on a 3.00. I know you are capable of A’s in English, history, and psychology, but I also know you’re challenged in sciences. So if you get two A’s, one B, and a C in science you still have a 3.25.” He leaned over and gave me a hug. “Mom and I will be happy with that.”

I felt better but knew at that moment it was all talk. As my high school coach always said. “The proof’s in the pudding.” Right now I did know if I was ready to try it.

Eight of us warmed up for the 5K race at Parkside in gray Northwestern t-shirts and purple nylon shorts over bunnies, temperatures warm enough that anything more would be too uncomfortable. I was still in a bit of shock. When Coach O’Shea handed out competition briefs that covered no more than a bikini bottom the whites of my eyes doubled in size. *Holy shit! He expects me to wear this?*

Anita cornered Jennifer and I that day after the workout.

“Well girls. No more granny panties!” She burst out laughing. “Looks like you two will be shopping at Casual Corner this afternoon!”

My first college race. I was nervous, but less so because Coach O’Shea wanted everyone to stay together, to make sure we all passed the two-mile mark in a cluster. Dad’s advice from my first race here as a sophomore in high school was stuck in my head.

“Whatever you run the first mile, double it and it should be your two mile split.”

Eight of us stood in box 15, glancing despondently at the steep hill only a quarter mile ahead, anxious to get the race underway. *I hate this wait. I gotta pee. Let's go. Let's go.* For as nervous as I was, after the tiny cannon fired I remembered almost nothing of the competition. Only Becky's gold necklace bouncing up and down as we climbed the initial hill and Anita's arm over my shoulder as we shuffled through the first finish chute.

Coach O'Shea was ecstatic as we circled at the back of the chutes, patting each of us on the back, pleased with the twelve second split between our #1 and #6. A runner from Drake wearing pigtails beat Joanne, Becky, and Janelle into the line, a second Bulldog runner separating Anita and me from our teammates, Jennifer's meager kick leaving her five seconds behind our front five.

We won the meet with twenty-two points, Joanne toting the championship trophy back to the van, everyone thrilled to get the season underway with such a good start. My college career was off to a good start.



The following weekend, I dropped a dime-sized token in the slot on the turnstile at the Davis Street station and climbed the stairs, worried this was the outbound platform and not the one towards Chicago. We had an open weekend without a meet and I was going to take advantage of the break.

I stared at the train on the other tracks, still uncertain if I was on the right platform, the adventure to Lincoln Park already beginning to frazzle my nerves. Annette and I were meeting for lunch at the DePaul campus, the first time we had been together in at least a month. My pre-season cross country camp and Annette's August gigs had kept us apart, our last meeting for ice cream at Dane's Dairy in Iowa City.

Annette and I had shared so many ups and downs in life, my best friend since junior high, inseparable throughout all those years. We had so many happy memories I would always treasure, the thought of her making me smile. I could picture Annette playing the guitar alongside Marie on the Wheel Room stage, her earrings glittering in the spotlight, the fourteen-year-

old pair playing with such poise in front of the college crowd at the open mic.

Memories of Marie still made me sad.

After I changed trains at Howard Street I stared out the L window trying to recall how long ago she had died. Four years. My freshman year at East High. I wondered what Marie would be doing if she was still alive. Going to college? Off to California? Playing at cabarets in Paris? Yeah, that's what she would be doing. Something off-beat. Something crazy. The thought made me smile.

The conductor broke through my reverie, his mumbled delivery hard to understand.

"Next stop..." I couldn't tell what he said after that. "Doors open..." Fullerton flashed by on the station sign.

I jumped to my feet, holding the overhead strap in a vice-like grip, apologizing as I bumped into another rider when the train screeched to a halt. Everyone turned to the right so I followed, shuffling down stairs into a busy Chicago street scene, eyes peeled for the Demon Dogs stand. Annette said the food shack was right below the station. I shouted and waved when I spotted her sitting at the picnic table, rushing over with arms spread wide.

"Annette!"

A grin filled my face, the scent of Baby Soft a welcome memory as we embraced. I was so happy, suddenly aware I was more homesick than I realized. We rocked side to side in the hug, both of us savoring the moment, sitting hip to hip on the wooden bench as words burst from my mouth.

"God, it's *so* good to see you. I couldn't wait for practice to finish so I could come down." I smirked. "And I didn't even get lost!" I hugged her again.

"C'mon. I'll show you my dorm room." Annette smiled. "Then we're going to get a burger at *Chances Are*." Annette clapped her hands together in front of her face. "Do you remember?"

"Of course. We ate there the weekend you sang at Earl of Old Town."

She grabbed my hand and we skipped down the sidewalk like ten-year-olds, carefree smiles spreading from ear to ear,

both of us glancing up at a cardinal chortling high in an evergreen tree on the edge of campus. The rest of the day was just as idyllic – shopping in Old Town, that afternoon going to “The World According to Garp” at the Biograph Theatre, later in the evening listening to a bluegrass music session at the Old Town School of Music.

It was after midnight when I fell asleep on her dorm room floor, Sunday morning munching on bagels and slurping coffee at a diner near campus, walking to Oz Park after and sitting in the grass by a field, sneaking peaks at boys playing flag football while we talked. The scene brought back a bittersweet memory. In junior high the three of us laid on Annette’s bed and talked about boys. And how we were going to make it big when we got older.

At noon we returned to her room and I changed into training clothes so I could run back to the Northwestern campus. *Sigh*. I hadn’t even left but I already missed her. I dropped my chin and then looked up with a smile as we huddled in front of her dormitory before I took off.

“Next time you have to come to Evanston.”

I gave her a long hug, smiling through teary eyes, turning to jog down Fullerton towards the lake, taking the gravel running path near the zoo for the nine mile trek back to the Northwestern campus. There was no way I could navigate city streets back to Evanston.

Chapter 2

September 20, 1982

My workouts had been good, but Monday's 5 x 1000m on the track was a great one. One that opened my eyes to times I might run. It gave me goosebumps. Coach O'Shea called the session escalation intervals – each thousand meter run faster than the last. Joanne was up first.

She nodded at coach and then led us through the initial one thousand, grabbing Anita's sleeveless NU t-shirt as we rounded the first corner, spitting out "follow me" as she ran down the backstretch of the track. There were still marshmallows on the tartan surface in Dyche Stadium after Saturday's football loss to Miami of Ohio, each of us trying to avoid the sticky white pillows of goo that had melted in today's heat. *What a dumb tradition.*

Coach O'Shea gave us the eight hundred meter split on the first interval "2:38...2:39...2:40" sprinting diagonally across the track to get over to the 1000 meter mark on time as we continued to circle the track. I stayed with the pack, responding to Joanne's steady surge on the backstretch, coach yelling "3:18...3:19...3:20" as we crossed the line.

"Great job ladies...go right into the jog. Don't stop." He was shuffling beside us. "I'll meet you at the starting line. Becky, you've got the next one. We're looking for sub 3:18."

I stared at the hickey on Janelle's neck during our two hundred meter jog, taking a deep breath as we neared the line for the second one, our group of eight still in a swarm. From five yards out Becky picked up the tempo, everyone hitting the starting line inches apart. This one almost felt easier, as though my body was finally loose, my stride relaxed and powerful.

"2:35...2:36...2:37...that-a-way girls." Becky took us around the corner and down the backstretch, coach shouting so we could hear times above our breathing. "3:15...3:16...3:17. Excellent job. Excellent." I may not have been tired when I started this interval but I definitely was now. The two hundred

meter jog was a little slower, proof everyone was feeling the effort.

“Anita, you take number three.” Coach smiled at her.

This one was going to be tough. Like jumping into the cold water of Lake Michigan. I had to steel myself to make the leap. *Let’s go Sarah. Get it done.* We took off. Joanne helped to control Anita’s tempo, although I knew Anita was tired enough that it was easier to keep the pace reasonable. As we ran down the homestretch on the second lap I prayed the next words from coach’s mouth started with two-thirty-something. I was so tired I thought it might be two-forty...

“2:34...2:35...2:36.” *Yes.*

The pack began to separate on the backstretch, four of us joining Anita and Becky as we crossed the thousand meter mark – Alice and Terri dropping from my peripheral vision.

“3:14...3:15...3:16. Great job ladies. You gotta dig deep on this next one. Don’t get lazy.”

Now I was tired. Real tired. How we ran 3:15 on the next one...I’ll never know. But six of us did, the marshmallows laying in lanes one and two having zero effect on where our foot strikes landed.

One to go. Janelle led it. I was almost too tired to care how much this one hurt – almost.

The tempo felt like I was running an eight hundred meter race, my breathing already rapid when we entered the initial backstretch. *Yikes!* At this tempo I knew the time after two laps had to be close to 2:33 or we wouldn’t hit the goal. *C’mon. Stay with them Sarah. You can do it.*

“2:32...2:33...2:34...”

I peeled out into lane two as we entered the last backstretch, Becky and Joanne on the inside, the sound of Anita’s breathing just off my shoulder, Jennifer’s loping foot strikes right on my heels. Five of us finished at the same moment, Janelle a split second later. It was hard to hear coach’s words over my breathing.

“3:12...3:13...3:14.” After that all I felt was pain.

I slowed to a stop, bent over with hands on knees, staring at a marshmallow flattened on the track. *I’m so glad it’s over.* Someone patted me on the back, my rapid breaths beginning to

slow, pain ebbing like the evening tide. *Whoa doggie. That hurt.*

“Nice job Becky...Joanne.” Coach put out his hand to slap. “Excellent Janelle. Very good Anita. I’m impressed Jennifer. Good Sarah.” He went around to the rest and slapped hands or patted them on the back. Finally everyone stood tall and shuffled over to get water. Coach O’Shea approached after we all got liquid.

“Ladies, this was an excellent workout today. The type of tempo we’ll need to run at the big meets down the road.” He paused. “Classes begin Thursday and the stress will amp up another notch. So call me if you have any issues. You are all good students but I want to remind you to pace yourselves. Be consistent about studying.”

He looked over the squad and continued.

“I know how tough it is here.” He smiled. “Heck, I doubt I could have gotten into Northwestern. But ask for help if you need it. Work with the professors and I know you will do fine. Okay, a fifteen minute cool down and then we have weights.”



Phillip Sanka joined us at Anita’s apartment on Friday night for our weekly session of “Dallas,” the only male on the men’s team interested in watching the show. The rest of them were probably out drinking after their poor team performance at the Notre Dame meet a few hours ago. Jennifer and Janelle were staring at the screen, leaning against a chair while they shared a bowl of popcorn, engrossed in the dialogue between Sue Ellen and JR.

“JR is such a slimeball.” Phillip was exasperated. “I mean, I can’t believe he slept with Holly. She is such a slut. It should have been JR in the crash...not her.”

“I can’t believe Sue Ellen decided to marry JR again.” Anita booed at the screen. “What was she thinking? If I ever do something that stupid please shoot me.”

“Now Bobby...” Becky smiled. “I don’t think there is anything he could do that would make me want to kick him out of bed.” She started laughing.

“You wish.” I replied. “He’d see those hairy legs and you’d be out in a second.” I snapped my fingers. Everyone broke out in laughter, Becky throwing a kernel of popcorn at me.

“A girl can dream can’t she?”

We all talked after the show was over, mentioning to the team that tomorrow night I was going to the Metro to meet a friend from Iowa City for the R.E.M. concert. Phillip indicated he was headed down that direction also and suggested we ride together. I was all for it. We arranged to meet at the Davis Street stop tomorrow at 7:30pm.

As the clock neared 10pm, yawns were abundant, my look at Jennifer met with a slight nod. She joined me in our goodbyes.

“We’re going back to the dorms. We’ll see you at nine tomorrow morning for practice.”

As we walked home we talked.

“It was cool to run 17:18 today but to finish 39th!” I shook my head. “Wow, I was surprised. I know the Notre Dame course is flat but...”

“Yeah, when we went through the mile at 5:15 and I couldn’t even see the front pack...well, I knew I’d be happy to be in the top fifty. Who won anyway?”

“I think it was Connie Jo Robinson...of North Carolina State. She ran something crazy like 16:22.”

We walked quietly in thought.

“After practice tomorrow morning I need to start reading “The Canterbury Tales.” I have a paper due in three weeks – four to five pages. I’m not looking forward to it.” Jennifer held the door for me. “How are your classes?”

“I’m not worried about anything but chemistry.” I turned to Jennifer with hands together. She was majoring in Chemical Engineering. “You gotta to help me. Please. My professor is the worst. I have *no* idea what he is saying in class. I’m writing so fast I don’t have time to listen to his explanations.” My head moved side to side. “But as long as I get a C, that will be enough to keep me happy.”

The following evening Phillip rode the L with me from campus down to Belmont Ave, talking about next weekend’s meet at Illinois and a little about classes, my seatmate asking to

join us when he learned Annette and I were going to shop at The Alley. He never really said what his plans were.

The Wrigley Field scoreboard loomed to the west as we stood when the doors closed at Addison, both of us anticipating the next stop. The Objects were opening for R.E.M. at the Metro, Annette raving about the Georgia group whenever we talked about music. This was so exciting, like nothing in Iowa City.

She promised to meet us outside by the south exit. The station was a madhouse of activity, people rushing up and down the stairs like there was a fire, on the sidewalk outside the doors a panhandler asking for change, high school kids in Goth clothing hanging on the fringe trying to look cool. I gave Annette a tap on the shoulder and an enthusiastic hug, turning to Phillip to introduce him.

Annette pointed to the right, following Phillip's eyes as he glanced across the street at the Berlin, indicating The Alley was the other way.

"I want to shop to get some new ideas for an outfit on stage. Something unique...something that makes a statement." Phillip jumped in.

"You should check out Alcalá's over on Chicago Ave. They have great Western stuff. And there's a thrift shop around the corner." He pointed. "On Clark Street that you can find 60's clothing...but let's look for accessories at The Alley – you know, scarves, belt buckles, jewelry, and such."

I'd never seen Phillip so animated...except when he watched "Dallas."

She tried on various clothing, including a pair of Doc Martin boots, and then we split up, Phillip going east to some vague destination; Annette and I west on Belmont and around the corner to the Metro. The concert was awesome, R.E.M. playing two encores before the lights came up, Annette taking puffs on marijuana passed through the crowd, never bothering to hand me the joint. She knew I wouldn't smoke.

After the show we caught the L to the Fullerton stop, arriving at Annette's dorm room just after 1am, exhausted from three hours on my feet. Her roommate was gone so I had a bed to sleep in, wearing a pair of Annette's pajamas that were a

size too big. As I laid my head on the pillow I couldn't get over her claim that Phillip was gay, the certainty in her words reluctantly removing my doubt. *Phillip...gay?* I mean, he did dress a little bit different, and didn't hang around with the guys on the team but... Whatever.

Although Thorsten and I talked each week, it seemed the bloom had disappeared in our relationship. It was still easy to exchange gossip, and I enjoyed his updates, but conversations were more polite than intimate, like I was speaking with my cousin instead of a guy I'd been dating for over two years. He was the best thing that ever happened to me in high school, but mom was right. A long distance relationship was tough to sustain. I just didn't want to admit it.

I began using birth control after mom's discussion in June, but did so for the regular periods, reasoning the pill would reduce my cramps and make everything easier. It was convenient to use this explanation to her, but if truth be told, if Thorsten and I had ever found the right time, there is no question I would have taken advantage. I cared about him that much, would have done it without reservation – yet in hindsight, I was glad we hadn't. The world was bigger than Iowa City.

Many mornings while I got dressed for classes I stared at myself in the full length mirror, happy that I didn't have a flabby stomach or hips so big that, as my brother always put it, "looked like the backend of a hay wagon." But when I stood sideways it was hard to think my chest would attract the attention of any boys – even with a flat stomach. Sigh.

Would I ever meet another guy?

Since the fall quarter began I had started including extra exercise each morning, riding the stationary bike in the Blomquist Center for thirty minutes, the two block walk to the recreation building making it easy to get in a workout before my first class. The Big Ten Meet was in Iowa City at the end of October and there was no way I could do anything but run well. My parents, high school coaches, and friends would be there to cheer me on. I couldn't let them down.

But what is my goal? How high can I finish?

The constant thought of the meet made it tough to fall asleep as September turned to October. It was a worry that wouldn't go away – because I didn't know anything about the competition. Could I be top ten? But the Big Ten had great runners. I had already discovered four of them were All-Americans at the 1981 NCAA Championships. So maybe a top ten finish was a little too big of a reach. A dream that would only set me up for failure. It was difficult to produce a goal.

Each week I scanned the results Coach O'Shea posted in his office, memorizing names and times of the conference veterans, following their performances like they were in a soap opera. Cathy Branta, Katie Ishmael, and Rose Thompson of Wisconsin had consistently run well no matter how big the meet. There was little reason to think they wouldn't do the same in Iowa City. And Nan Doak of Iowa was 10th at the DI National meet last year and would be on her home course. No way I could race with her.

The Spartan's Karen Campbell had turned in fast times, two of Michigan runners impressing me with their consistency, and Becky Cotta of Purdue was undefeated, winning every race by large margins – especially on hilly courses. She was good enough to win it all. Would a top fifteen goal be smarter? Yet even that made me nervous. Might be too big of a stretch. How about somewhere between fifteen and twenty? It sounded a bit more reasonable.

The truth was that I really didn't have a clue.

On Wednesday morning, of the second week of classes, I push open the outside door of our dormitory for Jennifer, a heavy backpack over my shoulders as we discussed the Tylenol story in the *Daily Northwestern* newspaper, waving goodbye as she turned towards the Tech Institute, while I walked to Kresge Hall for English.

It was strange to think of myself as a college student, even though we'd been in classes for five days. The routine of pre-season cross country camp had changed, my morning regime now beginning with a 7am ride on an exercise bicycle, cereal and coffee with my roommate in the dining hall, and then classes from 9am – 2:30pm, with a one hour break for lunch at

11am. It was unusual to be eating so early, but it was my only opportunity.

In English class I already had a thick book which needed to be completed by Friday, five chapters for the Early American History quiz tomorrow, and my daily assignments in Calculus II – which I dreaded. But chemistry class was another story. I could barely understand what the professor was saying, his lectures filling my brain with fog instead of fact, shuffling out of class each day very discouraged. Initially I thought I could get a C, but I was beginning to wonder.

At least practices were going smoothly, my confidence growing as I proved to myself and my teammates that I was worthy of their respect. Yesterday on the two ten minute runs I held my own, the 5:45 pace challenging but doable, finishing among the girls on each session. I would need the confidence at Wisconsin this weekend.

It was interesting to discover the strengths of my teammates – the stamina of Janelle, Joanne, and Jennifer – the footspeed of Anita, Becky, and myself. The 3-J's, as I called them, hated speed sessions and loved anything which involved endurance, while my group was just the opposite, thriving on short intervals, relishing anything that required speed.

But I always recognized the importance of being a well-rounded runner. My high school coach, Mr. Raffensperger, preached to me that even though my speed was an asset, a lack of endurance could be an anchor – holding me back from running with the best. That's why I biked in the mornings. To improve my aerobic fitness.

On Friday afternoon, Coach O'Shea drove us up to Madison for the Wisconsin Invitational. We did a run-through on the Yahara Hills course when we arrived, excited to race against the nationally ranked teams – but a little worried about the reality. As we followed the white line around the golf course Anita turned to me.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I beat Cathy Branta?” Anita had a small smile.

“Wow, really?” My eyebrows went up. It was hard to believe anyone could beat Cathy.

“Yeah...because I didn’t. In fact, I couldn’t beat her if you gave me a stick.” Anita burst into laughter.

Saturday morning was unusually warm, the lush golf course releasing moisture from the grass as the sun found a foothold on temperatures, the discomfort ahead nothing to look forward to. Waiting for the race to begin I was drenched in sweat, leaning forward from the back row of our team as the starter blew a whistle, eleven other teams matching our poses.

BOOM.

I followed Anita as she shot from our box – to our side the Iowa State team in red and yellow matching our efforts as we skirted a kidney shaped pond and ran past the first green. Up front was the entire Wisconsin squad, Rose Thomson and Cathy Branta leading their charge, individuals from Kansas State, Texas, and BYU tailgating the Badger squad.

Joanne, Becky, and Anita led our Wildcats, Coach O’Shea shouting, “Good job ladies” as we approached the second green. “Maintain your position. Work together.” The red and white of Wisconsin held their team lead as runners circled the second green like horses on a merry-go-round, the burnt orange of Texas, and royal blue of BYU mixed in with the Iowa State harriers.

Anita checked over her shoulder as we made a right turn, tapped her left hip and motioned for me to run at her side, the first mile just past the U-turn on the north end of the course. I pulled up on her hip as we leaned into the corner, just ahead, an official shouting out times.

“5:11...5:12...5:13...5:14.”

Joanne, Becky, Anita, and I worked as a foursome, Coach O’Shea pointing out a cluster of runners as we headed back to the club house the first time.

“Good job ladies. Work on that group of Longhorns.” He pointed as he shuffled alongside. “They’ll come back.”

My teammates following his directive, their eyes tracking the three Texas runners only fifteen yards in front. Joanne pointed and we stepped up the tempo, steadily reducing the gap as we neared the halfway point near the club house, the four of us finally close enough that we could hear the girls breathing.

We followed in their wake as we made a giant U-turn, Becky taking a deep breath before we surged towards the Longhorns.

In a matter of twenty-five yards all of us were around them, coach suddenly appearing along the white line to give us more advice.

“Excellent ladies. Excellent.” He pointed again. “K-State...the girls in purple.”

This time I had to search my soul to find the courage, but I did, following my teammates past the runners in purple, the official shouting two mile times only background noise, my breathing so loud I couldn't hear anything else. We passed the pair before we made the loop around the green at the north end of the Yahara Hills course, one kilometer remaining before we crossed the line. The first negative thoughts crossed my mind.

I'm not going to make it. I can't stay with them.

“C'mon. One more girl in purple.” Coach O'Shea's pleas broke through my fatigue. “Just one more.”

Like obedient soldiers we pushed after the K-State runner, Anita and Becky catching her before the line, Joanne and me coming up a few steps short. As I slowed to a stop my thighs felt like they had been beaten with a sock full of quarters, breaths so fast it made me squeeze my eyes closed. I couldn't remember ever being so tired. I draped an arm around Joanne's shoulders in the chute, collapsing to the ground when we exited the back.

I'm dead. I am so dead.

The Wildcats finished fourth out of the eleven teams, losing to Wisconsin, Iowa State, and Brigham Young.



Our men's and women's teams flew to Minneapolis for the Minnesota Invitational the middle of October, the last meet before the conference championships, our men's and women's squads tagging along with the football team for their contest against the Gophers Saturday afternoon. Becky was my seatmate on the flight, both of us taking a break after forty minutes of reading. I smiled and leaned towards her.

“I’m worried about putting on weight, you know, eating too much in the dining hall.” I buried my head like a scared turtle. “Do you have any suggestions to...?” My words faded.

“Sarah.” She had such a serious look. I was suddenly nervous. “Sarah.” Becky locked her eyes on mine.

“I just want to say one word to you...just one word.” I was waiting for her to smile but she didn’t. It was freaking me out. “Are you listening?”

I nodded, trying to guess why she was so serious. *Did I do something wrong?*

“Baggies.” *What?*

Becky’s face went from earnest to laughter in a split second, my faint response to her giggles half-hearted. *What in the hell is going on?* She finally stopped laughing.

“Didn’t you see ‘The Graduate?’ You know the graduation party scene where some guy pulls Dustin Hoffman aside to tell him the future?”

“Kinda.”

Becky smiled and shook her head.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to tell you is, always bring healthy snacks in your backpack. You know, baggies with carrots, nuts, pretzels...apples, oranges, bananas...so you have something good to munch on.” Becky patted my hand. “Otherwise you’ll be getting Doritos and Ding Dongs from the vending machines.” She laughed. “And definitely skip lunch in the dining hall...too much fattening food.”

It was chilly when we got off the chartered plane, the leaves on trees filled with more color than those in Evanston, the skies cloudy and portending rain.

That afternoon we did a run-through on the Bolstad Golf Course marveling at the constant undulations, the hills on this tough course a great tune-up for the Big Ten meet in two weeks. Stacey Bant, my roommate at the Kinney Championships in San Diego two years ago was a sophomore on the Minnesota team, a cast encasing her lower leg, a crutch under each arm. I waved and rushed over to give her an awkward hug, stepping back when we released.

“What happened? Is it broken?” She nodded.

“Stress fracture. Right behind my little toe.” Stacey grimaced. “So now I have to use these medieval torture sticks.” She indicated the crutches. “For two more weeks. No Big Ten meet for me.”

“Bummer. Will you be able to redshirt?”

“Yep.” Stacey nodded. A horn honked in the background. “Well, I gotta go. It’s my ride. See you tomorrow.”

Knowing the course is hilly and running a hilly course are two different things. It was quite apparent the Bolstad GC was filled with ups and downs but the reality of glancing at a hill that never seemed to end was tough to absorb. Although I hung with teammates throughout the race, my success today was more a battle of attrition than a triumphant performance.

From the gun we had seven in a tight pack up front, the squads from Minnesota and South Dakota State with equal representation, a runner from UW-La Crosse charging to the front as we crested the gradual slope four hundred meters from the starting line. Anita, Joanne, and Becky were shoulder to shoulder with the La Crosse athlete, Jennifer, Janelle, and me half a step back.

We had already climbed two challenging ridges by the time we approached the mile, an official calling “5:25...5:26...5:27” as we passed. *Whoa doggie. This race is going to hurt.*

The big hill on the back side of the course loomed ahead, the thought of it as exciting as shaving my legs with a dull razor. “C’mon girls” was all Becky could spit out, six of us charging up the long slope, breathing so loud it was tough to hear anything but the air racing in and out of my mouth. At the top of the hill there was a spectator waving a big sign back and forth like a carnival barker, repeatedly shouting.

“Go Tori Go!”

I stared at the cardboard poster twenty yards above us, Joanne falling behind as I continued to respond to challenges from Becky and Anita near the crest of the hill. The effort hurt so badly I wanted to cry out. All I felt was pain. *I’m dying.* I passed the two mile but times from the official didn’t register in my brain, the last hill at the northeast corner of the Bolstad course a huge obstacle between me and the finish line.

When I made that turn towards the finish I was half-past dead, uncertain how I would ever get to the line, the needle on my gas gauge far into the red. Anita and Becky pulled away from me as we entered the long last straight, Alm from Minnesota passing me with two hundred meters remaining, my resistance fading like a dying comet. I couldn't have been going at more than a jog when I crossed the chalked white line, stopping at the mouth of the chute to put hands on my knees, an official grabbing my arm to pull me forward.

Fifth place. *Not bad.*

Anita was lying on the grass at the back of the chutes, her eyes closed, Becky bent over beside her, glancing up at me. "Nice job girls." I patted Becky lightly on the back and tapped Anita on the forehead. We turned to see Joanne halfway down the chutes with one Minnesota runner in front and another trailing, Jennifer two runners behind that cluster in ninth place. I turned to Anita and Becky.

"We won." We had five before the Gopher's number four.

"Way to go ladies!" Coach O'Shea lifted a hand to slap mine, waiting for me to open my palm. "Nice job Sarah. You were tough."

He waited until everyone's breathing slowed, some teammates standing, others sitting in the grass.

"I liked what I saw today. An aggressive start, strong pack running, and a good response to the hills. We'll continue to do work on Mt. Trashmore each week, but I'm sure you can see how important the hills will be in team success at the Big Ten meet."

He paused as a flock of geese passed overhead, their load honks overwhelming his voice, resuming with a smile.

"We beat Minnesota today so we've shown our team can be in the top five at the conference meet. Wisconsin, Michigan, and Iowa are tough, but after them it's up for grabs. So if we do our job – run as a pack and challenge the other schools on the hills, well..."

We cheered on the boy's team while doing our cool down, Coach Nalley happy with Tim and Bob in the top two spots on the 8K course, Phillip only four places behind them. Their squad was also victorious.

Later that afternoon, while the boys team went to the football game with our coaches, Phillip joined us in Dinkytown for a late breakfast on the Minnesota campus, eight of us spreading out at two tables in Tony's Diner. I was happy coach let us shower so we could remove the grime and get into regular clothes.

"I can't believe the number is up to seven...people who died from the Tylenol capsules." Anita took a bite of the bagel. "Did you read the article in the *Daily* yesterday? They said the capsules were tampered with when they were on the shelves."

"Yeah, my mom was freaking out." I bit off a piece of bacon. "Can you imagine if it happened in Evanston? I mean, Arlington Heights and Elk Grove are only fifteen miles away.

"It's weird that they still don't know who did it." Jennifer continued. "I had some capsules so I exchanged them...but I'm still uncomfortable."

"Thank God I use Midol!" Anita smiled.

I wish our football team had lost because the plane was crazy on the way home. At least I was pleased with the 17:51. There would have been nothing worse than a happy gridiron team alongside a poor cross country performance.

Coach dropped us off at the dorms after the flight from Minneapolis, Jennifer and I looking forward to a long nap before we did a little homework. She was such a great roommate. We were both serious students, consistent about putting in study time at the library, and most importantly, getting to bed by 11pm. We needed regular sleep, our room at the end of the hall making it easier because it was away from traffic noise on Sheridan Road, and the obnoxious girls yelling up and down hallways on weekends.

In spite of the school's academic reputation, our dormitory had far too many who went out on Thursday and Friday nights, more than likely sorority pledges, coming home drunk well after midnight, Jennifer and I making a point to pound on their doors early the next morning. The first time I did this Jennifer thought I was crazy, but she quickly took to the payback, laughing at her own brazenness.

After Becky's talk on the plane Jennifer and I began carrying plastic bags of carrots, grapes, strawberries, and

pretzels; including an apple, orange, or banana in backpacks as we trudged towards campus each morning. It was the best advice I'd gotten from a teammate – a simple way to control our intake. Wearing bun-huggers accented my worries about putting on weight, and this simple act kept concerns at bay. Mostly.

Initial thoughts that college was easy had quickly changed, workloads piling up like dirty laundry in the hamper, the assignments never done. I was getting A's in the history and English classes, but in chemistry I felt like a drowning swimmer, struggling every day just to stay afloat. With Jennifer's help I kept my head above water – although I rarely felt ready for the next day's class. Calculus was challenging, never allowing me to coast, but if I put in a steady effort things would be okay.

Chapter 3

October 30, 1982

It was exciting to be back in Iowa City...but nerve-racking to know why.

The 1982 Big Ten Cross Country Championships. Mom and dad stopped by our hotel Friday after the team dinner, sitting on either side of me in the lobby, planning out the rest of the weekend, meeting my teammates for the first time as they checked out guys from other teams. I was planning to stay after the race, mom promising to drive me back to Evanston Sunday afternoon.

Danny, my older brother, would be in town to watch me run the Saturday morning race, excited to watch me compete – the first time in three years. He had always been my biggest supporter when I was little, encouraging me to try every sport the boys did, patient with me when all the neighborhood kids were anything but, teaching me the ins and outs of everything – how to shoot a free throw or a tip on the correct hitting stance. I begged him to come watch, wanting to make him proud. To let him know he was a big part of the reason I got to this point.

Although the race course was on Upper Finkbine, at breakfast the next morning I asked the girls if we could warm up on Lower Finkbine, worried I would get too many well-wishers bothering me before the competition. I was far too nervous and their good intentions would only make the pressure worse.

As always, Anita had something to say.

“No problem Sarah...but I was sorta thinking maybe we should set up a receiving line after the race.” She grinned like the Cheshire Cat. “At the back of the chutes. You know, where your fans could come up and say hi...like a wedding reception line.” She laughed. “I’ll arrange the fees for autographs and if they want a picture with you it will cost them...a buck.”

Anita burst out laughing, all of us joining in.

I did a fifteen minute jog with the girls and then met dad over by the Letterman's Club patio twenty minutes before the race, using the bathroom in the building that he somehow got me into. When I returned he began.

"Okay, lay on your back, hands on your stomach. Close your eyes." He paused. "In through your nose...two...three...four...five. And out one...two...three...four...five." He repeated this pattern for three minutes and then let me breathe at my own tempo. When I looked relaxed he continued.

"How many state titles in cross country did you win?" Dad waited for my response.

"Two."

"And how many state titles did you win in track?"

"Seven."

"Good. And who is the best father in the world?" He chuckled.

"You!"

"You better believe it." Dad grinned. "Today's prediction. Seventeenth! It's my lucky number."

I gave him a big hug and jogged to the starting line.

There is no sporting event more colorful than the starting line of a cross country race on a crisp fall morning, the cool air sharpening the hues. The setting was resplendent with color, leaves awash in red, yellow, and brown; the green grass brilliant against the fluffy white clouds and bright blue sky; athletes in multicolored uniforms of navy and orange, blue and yellow, black and gold; others in single colors of green and purple and red.

Runners did strides to burn off nervous energy, shooting from the starting line like crayons flying from a fallen box, tension filling the air as others nervously shuffled side to side, repeatedly running fingers over ears to put hair in place. There was a long whistle and then dead silence, only the soft sounds of breathing from teammates as we waited for the starter.

"Runner's set." Everyone leaned forward at the command. "BOOM!" And we were off.

It was easy to spot Nan Doak sprinting to the front, her blond ponytail bobbing side to side like a happy dog's tail, the entire Wisconsin team hot on her heels, Purdue's Becky Cotta weaving through the Iowa squad to get beside the leading Hawkeye. Our team got out well, positioned in front of the bell-shaped curve, riding it as though pushed by a wave, all of us praying we'd finish the race as a top five team.

Coach O'Shea was at the turn three hundred yards from the start, shouting through cupped hands.

"Remember to ride the hill. Stay relaxed."

The downhill must have been 250-300 yards long, ninety-two runners moving at a pace that would have been crazy on the flat, each of us anything but relaxed despite his entreaties. Coach claimed the initial 800 meters would be fast, somewhere between 2:20-2:25 because much of it downhill.

At the turn around the 14th green I had no doubt his estimate was pretty close, all of us leaning hard into the corner as though we were running on an indoor track, colors flashing by like wooden ponies on a carousel. Behind us I could hear a loud "oof" and someone stumble. *Bummer.*

Anita, Joanne, and I were twenty-five meters behind Nan Doak and Becky Cotta, the pair charging up the hill side by side, Rose Thomson and Cathy Branta leading the Wisconsin squad, every one of them oblivious to the incline. As runners neared the top of the long hill I recalled Coach O'Shea's words after yesterday's run-through.

"Remember, no one is going to fade up the first hill. Don't be worried. Expect to hold your position. But you'll begin to see cracks in their armor the second hill so take advantage of it, and on the third one I want you push hard and improve your position."

The course worked its way back towards the clubhouse, spectators on either side of the white line shouting through cupped hands, the wall of sound pushing us ahead.

"Go Sarah. You can do it." "Great job Sarah." "Go get 'em Sarah." I recognized the voices of my high school teammates as I ran the gauntlet.

"You can do it Sarah. At-a-way." It was my aunt. "Whoo hoo, let's go Sarah."

“Eyes up.” I knew it was dad. “I want you to get three up the next hill.” He pointed at the trio.

“Great job Sarah.” It was Danny. “Awesome.”

I glanced over at Anita and Joanne, the three of us turning in unison down the hill into the second loop. It made me nervous to not see the others but I didn’t have time to look for them. As we galloped down the slope I tried to count the number of runners in front, Iowa’s Doak leading the field. *Twenty-three?*

Our feet slapped the grass on the downhill like wet cardboard hitting cement, gravity pushing runners almost faster than legs could tolerate, a Michigan State Spartan just ahead stumbling when the load got too heavy. We curled around the 2nd green and I turned to see if I could spot teammates just as my high school coach shouted through cupped hands when we leaned into the corner.

“That-a-way Sarah.” It was Coach Raffensperger. “You’re doing great. Keep it going.”

A pair of Purdue runners with white bows in their hair and a redhead from Michigan State were only ten yards ahead. We slid by one of the Boilermakers halfway up the hill, her teammate glancing over when we went by seconds later, the redhead succumbing to our efforts a few yards from the top of the long slope. *Twentieth.*

Coach O’Shea shuffled alongside us as we skirted the clubhouse, fans shouting from every direction.

“C’mon girls. Last loop. Dig deep. Keep it going.”

Ten seconds later I heard dad’s voice again.

“Awesome Wildcats. Awesome. You got three back there.” He pointed ahead. “Now get four more. Next hill.”

From my peripheral vision it was clear Anita and Joanne were moving their arms in bigger arcs, fatigue stealing strength from legs with a mile remaining. I’m certain my arms looked the same as theirs. *I’m so dead. I don’t know if I can do it anymore.*

A left turn and we were racing down the initial descent a last time, my legs crying out for relief from the relentless pounding, everyone’s speed significantly slower this time through. We pulled up on a Michigan runner as the 14th green

neared, the three of us hanging back until we came out of the turn. *Here goes nothing.*

Six hundred meters remained, two hundred fifty meters of it uphill. I glanced at my teammate's faces, their eyes pinched tight like they were running through a cloud of dust, only blank stares as we went around the Wolverine. Runners from Illinois, Iowa, and Indiana were just ahead as we suffered the long climb, Joanne slipping behind as Anita and I pushed after the trio just in front. I didn't know how much longer I could last. *I'm dying.*

We passed the Hawkeye and then the Hoosier two seconds later, the Illini runner fighting us tooth and nail as the apex of the hill approached. I had nothing in the tank, my mental toughness gone, Anita slipping away with every step.

"C'mon darling. You can do it." At first I thought I imagined it but she said it again. *"C'mon darling. Keep fighting. I know you can."*

It was Marie – my fallen friend.

Off the top of the hill I fought to pull back even with Anita, both of us going by the Illinois runner with one hundred meters remaining, Anita beating me to the finish line by a step. *Seventeenth. Just as dad predicted.*

I squeezed my eyes closed, the pain racking my body as I ran hands along the pennants in the chute to keep me walking straight, breaths blasting from lungs in a steady beat. Reaching out, I put hands on Anita's shoulders, and leaned forward into her.

"Thanks." I paused. *"You were a godsend."* I took a deep breath. *"I couldn't have...done it without you."*

Dad and Danny rushed up to me at the back of the chutes, my father squeezing me in a bearhug, smiling as he said.

"Seventeenth. Just like I predicted."

My brother enveloped me in his arms, the first hug I could ever remember him ever giving me.

"You did good Sarah. Real good." He smiled and patted me on the head.

My high school coach approached.

"Impressive Sarah. Very impressive." He grimaced, uncertain whether to continue. *"Did you know that your*

teammates get knocked over on the turn at the bottom of the first downhill.” I shook my head, my eyebrows going up. “Someone caught a heel...the blond-headed runner on your team, and she fell into two of your teammates, the three of them flat on the ground as the pack pulled away. One of them didn’t finish and the other two never worked their way back into position. So it’s not good...teamwise.

My head dropped. That’s why Becky and Jennifer still hadn’t come out of the chutes.

Ten minutes later we learned the team was ninth. *Damnit!* If those two had finished in the top thirty – a realistic performance, our team would have been fourth. We were quiet on the cool down, a rain cloud hanging over every head. We had no chance of running in the NCAA Regional with this performance.

I sighed. Being a college runner was harder than I guessed.

Just a year ago my only strategy in cross country was to run to the front and make sure no one passed me. I was happy with seventeenth at the conference meet, grateful for a fifth in any of our triangulars, never seriously thinking I could win any of the races. Now I was one of those invisible athletes sprinting towards the chutes, spectators paying little attention to my time or place, thinking of me as just another unknown runner.

Weird.

It was fun to spend time with mom on the drive to Evanston after the weekend in Iowa City, the four hour trip filled with stories about her college years and the fun she had. We were going to meet Annette for dinner in Old Town and then mom would turn around and head home. I didn’t envy her, but the fourth grade students at Hoover Elementary expected to see mom bright and early Monday morning.

When we arrived at the scheduled time Sunday afternoon Annette was sitting on a bench outside her DePaul dorm, a feigned smile and unenthusiastic wave leaving me a bit unsettled. She wasn’t dressed to go out. I jumped out of the passenger seat and rushed over, her eyes red and watery.

“What’s wrong?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. She gave me a quick hug and then held my hand, motioning for mom to come over, holding me in a hug until mom approached.

“Let’s sit down on the bench.” She pointed. Mom glanced at me with a worried look, putting an arm around my shoulders as we sat. Annette took a deep breath and looked at me.

“Your dad called about two hours ago.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. She wiped them away with a sleeve. “Danny was in a car crash on the way back to Luther...just outside of Waterloo. He...he...is alive but in critical condition.”

I began to sob, falling sideways into mom’s embrace. *This can’t be true.* It made me think of Marie’s death four years ago. *Please God. Please let Danny be okay.* Annette wiped her eyes and continued. It was hard to hear Annette’s words over my weeping.

“Your father said he’ll meet you at Mercy Hospital in Waterloo.” Annette looked at mom, handing her the number for the hospital. “He said you can try to reach him there, but to leave a message if you can’t...so...so he knows you’re on the way.”

Mom stood up, holding her arms out to give Annette a hug.

“Thank you.” She kissed Annette’s temple and then held her shoulders at arm’s length. “I know how hard that was. I’m sorry you had to be the bearer of bad news.” Mom leaned in and gave her another hug. “Take us to a phone so I can call.”

Mom hugged me tightly and then held my hand as we followed Annette to the public phones in the lobby of the dorm.



My brother looked so fragile in the bed. I just stared, afraid to approach him, both of his eyes swollen shut. A heart monitor with wires snaking to his chest beeped quietly, the gentle rise and fall of his chest the only thing that let me know he was alive. Mom went over and kissed him on the forehead, whispering something in his ear. I didn’t know what to do, fighting to stop the tears. Dad grabbed my hand.

“Let’s go over to the lounge so we can talk.”

I was numb, following my father like a little child. Mom and I sat hip to hip on the couch, dad pulling a desk chair over so he could face us. He washed a hand across his haggard face, took a deep breath, and then leaned forward.

“Danny’s in a coma right now. They don’t know when he’ll wake...but the emergency room doctor said his vital signs are good. That if he wasn’t wearing his seat belt...” Dad dropped his head. “But he was.” He paused to compose himself.

“He must have hit his head on the steering wheel...his left leg and three ribs are broken.” Dad pursed his lips together. “But the doctor said that right now there is no reason he won’t recover. That he can come out of this okay.” He wiped tears from his eyes.

“I got us a room at the Holiday Inn across the street...so we’ll stay there tonight...” His words faded. “For two or three days and then we’ll make a decision...on how long we’ll be here.”

This was all so depressing, guilt settling on my shoulders like a heavy fog. My big brother...who was such a big presence in my life was struggling to stay alive.

Dad insisted I go for a run the next morning, promising to join me so I wouldn’t get lost. We drove over to the Northern Iowa campus in Cedar Falls, borrowing a bicycle from a college buddy, heading over to the George Wyth State Park only blocks from the residence. We talked as I ran on the dirt trail while I ran at an easy pace, the forest floor covered with yellow, orange, and red leaves from maple trees. It was so peaceful.

“I get along well with Jennifer, she’s saved me in chemistry, but Anita is the life of the team. She’s a blast. Anita is the girl I met at the second Kinney Cross Country meet – the one back in San Diego when I traveled by myself.”

“She did a great job at the Big Ten meet.” Dad smiled. “I’ll bet she places at the conference indoor meet. Where’s it at?”

“I think Madison...in late February.”

“That’s great!” He smiled. “I’ll be able to come up and watch you run.” The thought made me happy.

We finished the eight mile loop in just over an hour, dad discussing plans for the rest of our day while I stretched, driving me to Perkins for breakfast. I showered at the hotel while he walked over to the hospital, arriving fifteen minutes later to see mom and dad speaking with a doctor just outside

Danny's room. They looked up as I approached, heads nodding as the doctor finished, waving over his shoulder as he walked away.

"Well, that was good news." Dad began. "Dr. Lee said Danny has shown positive neurological improvement...he claimed it's good news." He smiled and then looked at mom. "Anyway. So your mother and I are going down to the cafeteria for coffee. Why don't you sit with Danny while we're gone." They started to turn but mom stopped.

"Steve left Drake early this morning and said he'd be here before lunch so he might show up before we get back."

Mom leaned over and kissed me on the temple, then walked down the hallway towards the elevators beside dad. I sighed and reluctantly entered the room. Danny looked exactly the same. I sat down in the chair by the bed. I didn't know what to do.

"Hi Danny. It's Sarah." I grinned. "You know, your favorite sister." I was at a loss for words but continued.

"This morning dad joined me on the bike for an eight mile run in some park a couple of miles from here." It was weird talking to someone who didn't respond but it still seemed like the right thing. "The trail was a nice loop and leaves covered the ground. It was really beautiful. I had a good time."

My thoughtlessness was disconcerting. Here I'm talking about having fun and he's in a coma. *What an asshole.* I was suddenly sad, my eyes filling with tears, heart drowning in guilt.

"Danny, I hope you'll forgive me for badgering you about coming down to watch me at the Big Ten meet." My body suddenly shuttered, only a deep breath allowing me to continue. "You missed the homecoming game with your girlfriend. And then...then you got in an accident because of me. I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

Tears rolled down my cheeks in a steady stream, only rustling at the door interrupting my sadness. It was Steve. I jumped up and smothered my brother in a big hug, trying to decide if the shocked look on his face was from my hug or his older sibling lying motionless in bed. Steve stared at Danny and took a deep breath, settling softly in the chair beside me.

He listened as I told him the latest news, quiet when I finished, finally looking up.

“God, I was so scared.” He whispered. “I was afraid he’d die before I got here.”

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