

**REJECTING MIDDLE AGE,  
BECOMING ONE OF THE WORLD'S FITTEST MEN,  
AND DISCOVERING MYSELF**



# **FINDING ULTRA**

**RICH ROLL**

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MEN, AND DISCOVERING MYSELF*

## ***RICH ROLL***



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## PREFACE

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The crash comes out of nowhere. One second I'm feeling good, cycling as fast as I can at good clip, even through the pouring rain. Then I feel a slight bump and my left hand slips off the damp handlebar. I'm hurled off the bike seat and through the air. I experience a momentary loss of gravity, then *bam!* My head slams hard to the ground as my body skids twenty feet across wet pavement, bits of gravel biting into my left knee and burning my shoulder raw as my bike tumbles along on top of me, my right foot still clamped in the pedals.

A second later I'm lying faceup with the rain beating down and the taste of blood on my lips. I struggle to release my right foot and pull myself up using the shoulder that doesn't seem to be bleeding. Somehow, I find a sitting position. I make a fist with my left hand and pain shoots up to the shoulder—the skin has been sheared clean off, and blood mixes with rainwater in little rivers. My left knee has a similar look. I try to bend it—bad idea. My eyes close, and behind them there's a pulsating purple-and-red color, a pounding in my ears. I take a deep breath, let it out. I think of the thousand-plus hours of training I've done to get this far. I have to do this, I have to get up. It's a race. *I have to get back in it.* Then I see it. My left pedal shattered, carbon pieces strewn about the pavement. One hundred and thirty-five miles still to go today—hard enough with two working pedals. But with only one? Impossible.

It's barely daybreak on the Big Island of Hawaii, and I'm on a pristine stretch of terra firma known as the Red Road, which owes its name to its red cinder surface, bits of which are now deeply lodged in my skin. Just moments before, I was the overall race leader at about 30 miles into the 170-mile, Day Two stage of the 2009 Ultraman World Championships, a three-day, 320-mile, double-ironman distance triathlon. Circumnavigating the entire Big Island of Hawaii. Ultraman is an invitation-only endurance-fest, limited to thirty-five competitors fit enough and crazy enough to attempt it. Day One entails a 6.2-mile ocean swim, followed by a 90-mile bike ride. Day Two is 170 miles on the bike. And the event's culmination on Day Three is a 52.4-mile run on the searing hot lava fields of the Kona Coast.

This is my second try at Ultraman—the first occurred just one year before—and I have high hopes. Last year, I stunned the endurance sports community by coming out of nowhere at the ripe age of forty-two to place a respectable eleventh overall after only six months of serious training, and that was after decades of reckless drug and alcohol abuse that nearly killed me and others, plus no physical exertion more strenuous than lugging groceries into the house and maybe repotting a plant. Before that first race, people said that, for a guy like me, attempting something like Ultraman was harebrained, even stupid. After all, they knew me as a sedentary, middle-aged lawyer, a guy with a wife, children, and a career to think about, now off chasing a fool's errand. Not to mention the fact that I was training—and intended to compete—on an entirely plant-based diet. *Impossible*, they told me. *Vegans are spindly weaklings, incapable of anything more athletic than kicking a Hacky Sack. No proteins in plants, you'll never make it.* I heard it all. But deep down, I knew I could do it.

And I did—proving them wrong and defying not just “middle age,” but the seemingly immutable stereotypes about the physical capabilities of a person who eats nothing but plants. And now here I was again, back at it a second time.

Just one day before, I'd begun the race in great form. I completed the Day One 6.2-mile



swim at Keauhou Bay in first place, a full ten minutes ahead of the next competitor. Clocking the sixth-fastest swim split in Ultraman's twenty-five-year history, I was off to an amazing start. In the late 1980s, I'd competed as a swimmer at Stanford, so this wasn't a huge surprise. But cycling? Different story altogether. Three years ago I didn't even *own* a bike, let alone know how to *race* one. And on that first day of the race, after I'd blasted out two and a half hours in strong ocean currents, deep fatigue had set in. With salt water-singed lungs and my throat raw from vomiting up my breakfast half a dozen times in Kailua Bay, I faced ninety miles in blistering humidity and gale-force headwinds en route to Volcanoes National Park. I did the math. It was only a matter of time before the cycling specialists would quickly make up lost time and I'd get passed on the final twenty miles of the day, a backbreaking four-thousand-foot climb up to the volcano. I kept looking back, fully expecting to see the Brazilian three-time Ultraman champ, Alexandre Ribiero, fast on my heels, tracking me like prey. But he was nowhere to be seen. In fact, I never saw a single other competitor all day. I could hardly believe it as I rounded the final turn through the finish-line chute, my wife Julie and stepson Tyler screaming from our crew van as I *won* the Day One stage! Leaping from the van, Julie and Tyler ran into my arms; I buried myself in their embrace, tears pouring down my face. And even more shocking was just how long I waited for the next competitor to arrive—a full ten minutes! *I was winning Ultraman by ten minutes!* It wasn't just a dream come true; I'd made an indelible mark on the endurance sports landscape, one for the record books. And for a guy like me—a plant-eating, middle-aged dad—well, with everything I'd faced and overcome, it was nothing short of remarkable.

So the morning of Day Two, all eyes were on me as I waited with the other athletes at the start line in Volcanoes National Park, tensed and spring-coiled in the early-morning dark, cold rain falling. When the gun sounded, all the top guys leapt like jaguars, trying to establish a quick lead and form an organized front peloton. It's an understatement to say that I wasn't prepared to begin the 170-mile ride with a flat-out, gut-busting sprint; I hadn't warmed up before and was caught completely off guard by just how fast the pace would be. Accelerating downhill at a speed close to fifty miles per hour, I dug deep to hold pace and maintain my position within the lead group, but my legs quickly bloated with lactate and I drifted off the back of the pack.

For this initial twenty-mile rapid descent down the volcano, the situation is what's called "draft legal," meaning you can ride behind other riders and safely ensconce yourself in the "wind pocket." Once enveloped in the group, you're able to ride pace at a fraction of the energy output. The last thing you want to do is get "dropped," leaving you to fend for yourself, a lone wolf struggling against the wind on nothing but your own energy. But that's exactly what I'd become. I was behind the lead pack, yet far ahead of the next "chase" group. Only I felt less like a wolf than a skinny rat. A wet, cold skinny rat, irritated and mad at myself for my bad start, already winded and staring at eight hard hours of riding ahead. The rain made everything worse, plus the fact that I'd forgotten covers for my shoes, so my feet were soaked and frozen numb. Not a lot bothers me, including pain, but wet, cold feet make me crazy. I considered slowing down to let the chase group catch up, but they were too far back. My only option was to soldier on, solo.

When I reached the bottom of the descent, I made the turn down to the southeastern tip of the island just as the sun was rising. I was finally beginning to feel warmed up by the time

made the turn onto the Red Road. This section is the one part of the entire race that's limits to crew support—no support cars allowed. For fifteen miles, you're on your own. I see no other riders as I flew through this rolling and lush but diabolical terrain, the pavement marked by potholes and sharp, difficult turns, gravel flying up constantly. Utterly alone, concentrated on the whir and push of my bike, the silence of tropical dawn broken only by my own thoughts of how wet I was. I was also irritated that my wife Julie and the rest of my crew had blown the hydration hand-off before the "no car" zone, leaving me bone-dry for this lonely stretch. And just like that, I hit that bump. A Red Road face-plant.

I unsnap my helmet. It's broken, a long crack threading through the center. I touch the top of my head, and under my matted, sweaty hair the skin feels tender. I squeeze my eyes shut, open them, and wiggle my fingers in front of my face. They're all there, all five. I cover one eye, then the other. I can see just fine. Wincing, I straighten out my knee and look around. Aside from a bird that I should probably be able to identify—it's long-necked with a sweeping black tail and a yellow chest—pecking at the ground by the bike, there's not a soul around. I listen hard, straining to hear the rising approach of the next group of riders. But there's nothing but the peaceful caw of a bird, a rustling in a tree close by, the slam of a screen door echoing through the trees, and over and over, the small crash of nearby ocean waves on sand.

Nausea moves through me. I hold my hand over my stomach and concentrate for a minute on the rise and fall of the skin beneath my hand, the in and out of my breath. I count to ten, then twenty. Anything to distract me from the pain now entering my shoulder like an army on full gallop—anything to keep me from focusing on the pulpy skin on my knee. The nausea subsides.

My shoulder is freezing up and I try to move it. It's no good. I feel like the Tin Man, calling out for the oilcan. I flap my feet back and forth, my damn wet feet. I stand up gingerly and put weight on the bad knee. Grunting, I lift the bike up and straddle it, flipping at the other remaining pedal with my foot. No matter what, I have to somehow make it another mile to the end of the Red Road, where the crews are waiting, where Julie will take care of me and clean me up. We'll put the bike in the van and shuttle back to the hotel.

My head throbs as I make a wobbly push-off and begin riding with one leg, the other dangling free, blood dripping from the knee. Beside me the sky is clearing into full morning over the ocean, a gray-white slate above muting the tropical sea to a dark-hued green spotted with rain. I think of the thousands and thousands of hours I've trained for this, how far I've come from the overweight, cheeseburger-addicted, out-of-shape guy I was just two years ago. I think of how I completely overhauled not just my diet, and my body—but my entire *lifestyle*—inside and out. Another look at my broken pedal, and then I think about the 135 miles still ahead in the race: *impossible*. That's it, I think, equal parts shame and relief flooding through me. For me, this race is over.

Somehow I press through that last mile or so of the Red Road, and soon I can make out the crews waiting ahead, vehicles parked, supplies and gear spread out in anticipation of tending to the approaching competitors. My heart begins to beat faster and I force myself to keep going toward them. I'll have to face my wife and stepson Tyler, tell them what happened, tell them how I've failed not just me, but them—my family that has sacrificed so much in support of this dream. *You don't have to*, a voice inside me whispers. *Why don't you just turn around—or, better yet, slink into the foliage before anyone sees you coming?*

I see Julie pushing past the other people to greet me. It takes a moment before she realizes what has happened. Then it hits her, and I see shock and worry cross her face. I feel the tears well up in my eyes and tell myself to keep it together.

In the spirit of *ohana*, the Hawaiian word for “family” that is the soul of this race, I’m suddenly surrounded by half a dozen crew members—from *other* competitors’ crews—arriving and rushing to my aid. Before Julie can even speak, Vito Biala, crewing today as part of a three-person relay team known as the “Night Train,” materializes with a first-aid kit and begins taking care of my wounds. “Let’s get you back on the road,” he states calmly. Vito is somewhat of an Ultraman legend and elder statesman, so I try to muster up the strength to return his wry smile. But the truth is, I can’t.

“Not gonna happen,” I tell him sheepishly. “Broken pedal. It’s over for me.” I gesture at the place on the bike where the left pedal used to be.

And I feel, somehow, a bit better. Just saying those words—actually telling Vito that I’ve decided to quit—lifts something dark off my shoulders. I’m relieved at what I’ve blundered into: an easy, graceful exit out of this mess, and very soon a warm hotel bed. I can already feel the soft sheets, imagine my head on the pillow. And tomorrow, instead of running a double marathon, I’ll take the family to the beach.

Next to Vito is competitor Kathy Winkler’s crew captain, Peter McIntosh. He looks at me and squints. “What kind of pedal?” he asks.

“A Look Kēo,” I stammer, wondering why he wants to know.

Peter vanishes as a pit crew of mechanics seize my bike and swing into action. As if trying to get an Indy 500 car back on the speedway, they begin running diagnostics—checking the frame for cracks, testing the brakes and derailleurs, eyeing the true of my wheels, Allen wrenches flying in all directions. I frown. *What are they doing? Can’t they see I’m done!*

Seconds later, Peter reappears—*holding a brand-new pedal, identical to mine.*

“But I—” My mind works furiously to understand how this situation has changed so dramatically from what I’d planned. They’re fixing me up, it’s dawning on me. They expect me to stay in the race! I wince as someone swabs my shoulder. This isn’t how it was going to be! I’d made up my mind: I’m hurt, the bike is broken; it’s over, isn’t it?

Julie, kneeling and bandaging my knee, glances up. She smiles. “I think it’s going to be okay,” she says.

Peter McIntosh rises from where he’s been adjusting the pedal into place. Staring directly into my eyes and sounding like a five-star general, he says, “This is not over. Now, get back on your bike and get it done.”

I am speechless. I swallow hard and look at the ground. Around me I can sense that the crews are all looking at me now, awaiting my response. They expect me to listen to Peter, to jump back on the bike, get going. *Get back in it.*

There are another 135 miles ahead of me. It is still raining. I’ve relinquished my lead and lost a huge amount of time to my competitors. Besides being completely checked out mentally, I’m hurt, wet, and physically drained. I take a deep breath, let it out. I close my eyes. The chatter and noise around me seem to fade, recede, and then altogether disappear. Silence. Just my heartbeat and the long, long road in front of me.

I do what I have to do. I turn off that voice in my head urging me to quit. And I get back on the bike. My race, it seems, is only just beginning.

## A LINE IN THE SAND

It was the night before I turned forty. That cool, late-October evening in 2006, Julie and our three kids were sound asleep as I tried to enjoy some peaceful moments in our otherwise rowdy household. My nightly routine involved losing myself in the comfort of my giant flat-screen cranked to maximum volume. While basking in the haze of *Law & Order* reruns, I'd pop away a plate of cheeseburgers and followed that welcome head-rush with a mouthful of nicotine gum. This was just my way of relaxing, I'd convinced myself. After a hard day, I felt I deserved it, and that it was harmless.

After all, I knew about harm. Eight years earlier, I'd awoken from a multiday, blackout binge to find myself in a drug and alcohol treatment center in rural Oregon. Since then I'd miraculously gotten sober, and one day at a time was staying that way. I no longer drank. I didn't do drugs. I figured I had the right to pig out on a little junk food.

But something happened on this birthday eve. At almost 2 A.M., I was well into my third hour of doltish television and approaching sodium toxicity with a calorie count in the thousands. With my belly full and nicotine buzz fading, I decided to call it a night. I performed a quick check on my stepsons, Tyler and Trapper, in their room off the kitchen. I loved watching them sleep. Aged eleven and ten, respectively, they'd soon be teenagers grasping for independence. But for now, they were still pajama-clad boys in their bunk beds dreaming of skateboarding and Harry Potter.

With the lights already out, I had begun hauling my 208-pound frame upstairs when midway I had to pause—my legs were heavy, my breathing labored. My face felt hot and I had to bend over just to catch my breath, my belly folding over jeans that no longer fit. Nauseous, I looked down at the steps I'd climbed. There were eight. About that many more remained to be mounted. *Eight steps*. I was thirty-nine years-old and I was winded by eight steps. *Man*, I thought, *is this what I've become?*

Slowly, I made it to the top and entered our bedroom, careful not to wake Julie or our two-year-old daughter, Mathis, snuggled up against her mom in our bed—my two angels illuminated by the moonlight coming through the window. Holding still, I paused to watch them sleep, waiting for my pulse to slow. Tears began to trickle down my face as I was overcome by a confusing mix of emotions—love, certainly, but also guilt, shame, and a sudden and acute fear. In my mind, a crystal-clear image flashed of Mathis on her wedding day, smiling, flanked by her proud groomsmen brothers and beaming mother. But in this waking dream, I knew something was profoundly amiss. I wasn't there. I was dead.

A tingling sensation surfaced at the base of my neck and quickly spread down my spine as a sense of panic set in. A drop of sweat fell to the dark wood floor, and I became transfixed by the droplet, as if it were the only thing keeping me from collapsing. The tiny crystal ball foretold my grim future—that I wouldn't live to see my daughter's wedding day.

*Snap out of it.* A shake of the head, a deep inhale. I labored to the bathroom sink and splashed my face with cold water. As I lifted my head, I caught my reflection in the mirror. And froze. Gone was that long-held image of myself as the handsome young swimmer.

champion I'd once been. And in that moment, denial was shattered; reality set in for the first time. I was a fat, out-of-shape, and very *unhealthy* man hurtling into middle age—depressed, self-destructive person utterly disconnected from who I was and what I wanted to be.

To the outside observer, everything appeared to be perfect. It had been more than eight years since my last drink, and during that time I'd repaired what was a broken and desperate life, reshaping it into the very model of modern American success. After snagging degrees from Stanford and Cornell and spending years as a corporate lawyer—an alcohol-fueled decade of mind-numbing eighty-hour workweeks, dictatorial bosses, and late-night partying—I'd finally escaped into sobriety and even launched my own successful boutique entertainment law firm. I had a beautiful, loving, and supportive wife and three healthy children who adored me. And together, we'd built the house of our dreams.

So what was wrong with me? Why did I feel this way? I'd done everything I was supposed to do and then some. I wasn't just confused. I was in free fall.

Yet in that precise moment, I was overcome with the profound knowledge not just that I needed to change, but that I was *willing* to change. From my adventures in the subculture of addiction recovery, I'd learned that the trajectory of one's life often boils down to a few identifiable moments—decisions that change everything. I knew all too well that moments like these were not to be squandered. Rather, they were to be respected and seized at all costs, for they just didn't come around that often, if ever. Even if you experienced only one powerful moment like this one, you were lucky. Blink or look away for even an instant and the door didn't just close, it literally vanished. In my case, this was the second time I'd been blessed with such an opportunity, the first being that precious moment of clarity that precipitated my sobriety in rehab. Looking into the mirror that night, I could feel that portal opening again. I needed to act.

But how?

Here's the thing: I'm a man of extremes. I can't just have one drink. I'm either bone dry or I binge until I wake up naked in a hotel room in Vegas without any idea how I got there. I'm crawling out of bed at 4:45 A.M. to swim laps in a pool—as I did throughout my teens—or I'm pounding Big Macs on the couch. I can't just have one cup of coffee. It has to be a Venturi laced with two to five extra shots of espresso, just for fun. To this day “balance” remains my final frontier, a fickle lover I continue to pursue despite her lack of interest. Knowing that about myself, and harnessing the tools I'd developed in recovery, I understood that any true or lasting lifestyle change would require rigor, specificity, and accountability. Vague notions of “eating better” or maybe “going to the gym more often” just weren't going to work. I needed an urgent and stringent plan. *I needed to draw a firm line in the sand.*

The next morning, the first thing I did was turn to my wife Julie for help.

As long as I've known her, Julie has been deeply into yoga and alternative healing methods, with some (to put it mildly) “progressive” notions about nutrition and wellness. Always an early riser, Julie greeted each day with meditation and a series of Sun Salutations followed by a breakfast of odoriferous herbs and teas. Seeking personal growth and counsel, Julie has sat at the feet of many a guru—from Eckhart Tolle, to Annette, a blue-eyed clairvoyant, to Chief Golden Eagle of the South Dakota Lakota tribe, to Paramhansa

Nithyananda, a youthful and handsome Indian sage. Just last year, in fact, Julie traveled by herself to southern India to visit Arunachala, a sacred holy mountain revered in yogic culture as a “spiritual incubator.” I’d always admired her for her willingness to explore; it usually seemed to work for her. But this kind of “alternative thinking” was strictly *her* territory, never mine.

Particularly when it came to food. To open our refrigerator was to see an invisible but obvious line running down the middle. On one side were the typical American heart attack-inducing items: hot dogs, mayonnaise, blocks of cheese, processed snack foods, soda, and ice cream. On the other side—Julie’s—were mysterious Baggies filled with herbal preparations and an unmarked Mason jar or two filled with putrid-smelling medicinal pastes of unknown origins. There was something she patiently told me was called “ghee,” and also chyawanprash, a pungent, brown-colored sticky jam made from an Indian gooseberry known as the “elixir of life” in Ayurveda, a form of ancient Indian alternative medicine. I never tired of poking fun at Julie’s ritualistic preparations of these strange foods. Though I’d grown accustomed to her attempting to get me to eat things like sprouted mung beans or seitan burgers, to say it “never took” is an understatement. “Cardboard,” I’d announce, shaking my head and reaching instead for my juicy beef burger.

That kind of food was fine for Julie, and certainly fine for our kids, but I needed *my* food. My *real* food. To her immense credit, Julie had never nagged me to change my ways. Frankly, I assumed she’d simply given up on me. But in truth she understood a crucial spiritual principle I’d yet to grasp. You can stand in the light. And you can set a positive example. But you simply cannot *make* someone change.

But today was different. The previous night had given me a gift: a profound sense not just that I needed to change, but that I wanted to change—*really* change. As I poured a massive cup of very strong coffee, I nervously raised the issue across the breakfast table.

“So, uh,” I began, “you know that detox, juice-cleanse thing you did last year?”

From a bite of hemp bread spread with chyawanprash jam, Julie peered up at me, a small smile of curiosity playing at her lips. “Yes. The cleanse.”

“Well, I think I might, well, uh, maybe I should, you know, give it a shot?” I couldn’t believe the words were coming out of my mouth. Even though Julie was one of the healthiest people I knew, and I’d seen how her diet and use of alternative medicine had helped her through so much—even miraculously, at one point—just twenty-four hours before, I would have argued till I was blue in the face that a “cleanse” was useless, even harmful. I’d never found any evidence to support the idea that a cleanse was healthy or that it somehow removed “toxins” from the body. Ask any traditional Western medicine doctor and he’ll agree: “These cleanses are not just innocuous, they’re downright unhealthy.” And by the way, what are these mysterious toxins, anyway, and how would a cleanse possibly remove them? It was all nonsense, I’d thought, pure fabrication, the babbling of snake oil salesmen.

But today, I was desperate. I could still feel the previous night’s panic, still feel my temples pounding. The drop of sweat and its dark portent, flashing before my eyes, were all too real. Clearly, my way was not working.

“Sure,” Julie said softly. She didn’t ask what had prompted this curious request, and she didn’t offer an explanation. As clichéd as it sounds, Julie was my soul mate and best friend—the one person who knew me better than anyone. Yet for reasons I still don’t fully

understand, I couldn't bring myself to tell her about what I'd experienced the night before. Maybe it was embarrassment. Or more likely, the fear I'd felt was simply too acute for words. Julie is too intuitive not to have noticed that something was clearly up, but she didn't ask a single question; she just let it unfold, without expectation.

In fact, Julie's expectations were so low that I had to ask her three more times before she actually returned from the alternative pharmacist with the goods needed to begin the cleanse—a journey that would soon change everything.

Together we embarked on a seven-day progressive regime that involved a variety of herbal teas, and fruit and vegetable juices (for more information on my recommended cleansing program, see [Appendix III](#), Resources, Jai Renew Detox and Cleansing Program). It's important to understand that this was not a "starvation" protocol. Each and every day I made certain to fortify my body with essential nutrients in liquid form. I cast aside my doubts and threw myself into the process with everything I had. We cleared the fridge of my Reddi-Wips, Go-Gurts, and salami, filling the empty shelves with large vats of tea boiled from a potpourri of what looked like leaves raked from our lawn. I juiced with vigor, downing liquid concoctions of spinach and carrots laced with garlic, followed by herbal remedies in capsule form chased by gagging on a tea with a distinct manure aftertaste.

A day later I was curled up in a ball on the couch, sweating. Try quitting caffeine, nicotine, and food all at once. I looked horrible. And felt worse. I couldn't move. But I couldn't sleep either. Everything was upside down. Julie remarked that I looked like I was detoxing heroin. Indeed, I felt like I was back in rehab.

But Julie urged me to hang tough; she said that the hardest part was soon to pass. I trusted her, and true to her word, each day proved easier than the day before. The gagging subsided, replaced by gratitude just to put something—anything—down my throat. By day three, the fog began to clear. My taste buds adapted and I actually began enjoying the regime. And despite so few calories, I began feeling a surge of energy, followed by a profound sense of renewal. I was sold. Day four was better, and by day five, I felt like an entirely new person. I was able to sleep well, and I only needed a few hours of sleep. My mind was clear and my body felt light, infused with a sense of vibrancy and exhilaration that I hadn't known was possible. Suddenly I was jogging up the staircase with Mathis on my back, my heart rate barely elevated. I even went out for a short "run" and felt great, despite the fact that I hadn't laced up a pair of running shoes in years and was on my fifth day without any real food! It was astounding. Like a person with poor eyesight donning a pair of glasses for the first time, I was amazed to discover that a person could feel this good. Until then a hopeless and lifelong coffee addict, I entered into a momentous collaboration with Julie on day two of the cleanse when we unplugged our beloved coffeepot and together walked it out to the garbage bin—an act neither of us would have thought possible in a million years.

At the conclusion of the seven-day protocol, it was time to return to eating real food. Julie prepared a nutritious breakfast for me—granola with berries, some toast with butter, and my favorite, poached eggs. After going seven days with no solid food, I might have been excused for inhaling the meal in seconds flat. But instead, I just stared at it. I turned to Julie. "I think I'm just going to keep going."

"What are you talking about?"

"I feel so good. Why go back? To food, I mean. Let's just keep going." I smiled broadly.

To understand me is to understand that I am an alcoholic, through and through. something is good, then more is better, right? Balance is for ordinary people. Why not strive for extra-ordinary? This had always been my rule—and my ruin.

Julie had tilted her head and frowned, clearly about to say something, when Mathis accidentally dumped her orange juice all over the table, a daily occurrence. Julie and I both jumped to the rescue before the juice spilled onto the floor. “Whoops,” Mathis giggled, and Julie and I both smiled. I swabbed at the sticky mess, and just like that, I was jolted out of my crazy idea. Suddenly the thought of juicing and cleansing forever seemed as stupid as actually is. “Never mind,” I said sheepishly. I looked down at my plate and speared a blueberry. It was the best blueberry I’d ever eaten in my whole life.

“Good?” Julie asked.

I nodded and ate another, then another. Beside me Mathis gurgled and smiled.

So I’d achieved my first goal by seizing that precious moment—walking through the open door and taking a stand. But now I needed a plan to build on what I’d started. I was going to have to find some kind of balance. Terrified of simply returning to past practices, I needed a solid strategy to move forward. Not a “diet” per se, but a regimen I could stick to long-term. In truth, I needed an entirely new *lifestyle*.

Without any real study, thought, or responsible inquiry, I decided the first step would be to try a vegetarian diet, with a commitment to working out three days a week. Cut out the meat, the fish, and the eggs. It seemed challenging yet still reasonable, and more importantly, *doable*. Remembering the lessons I’d learned in becoming sober, I decided not to dwell on the idea of “never having a cheeseburger [or drink] ever again” and just focus on taking it day by day. To show her support, Julie even bought me a bike for my birthday and encouraged me to exercise. And I held up my end of the bargain, opting for burritos without the carnitas, veggie burgers instead of beef, and casual Saturday morning bike rides with friends in place of cheese omelet brunches.

But it was not long before my spirits began to plummet. Despite jumping back into the pool and the occasional jog or bike ride, the extra weight simply wasn’t coming off, and I was steady at 205 pounds—a far cry from my 160-pound college swimming weight. But even more disconcerting was the fact that my energy levels soon declined to my pre-cleanse state of lethargy. I was happy that I’d returned to exercising again and had reminded myself of my long-lost love of the water and outdoors. But the truth was that after six months on the vegetarian diet, I didn’t feel much better than I had that night on the staircase. Still forty pounds overweight, I was despondent and ready to abandon the vegetarian plan altogether.

What I failed to realize at the time was just how *poorly* one can eat on a vegetarian diet. I convinced myself that I was healthy, but when I paused to reflect on what exactly I was eating, I realized that my diet was dominated by a high-cholesterol, artery-clogging lineup of processed foods, high-fructose corn syrup, and fatty dairy products—stuff like cheese pizza, nachos, soda, fries, potato chips, grilled cheese sandwiches, and a wide array of salty snack foods. Technically, I was “vegetarian.” But healthy? Not even close. Without any true understanding of nutrition, even I knew this wasn’t a good plan. Time to reevaluate once again. On my own this time, I made the radical decision to entirely remove not just meat but all animal products from my diet—dairy included.

*I opted to go entirely vegan.*



Despite Julie's vigilant commitment to healthy living, even *she* wasn't vegan. So at least within the Roll household I was entering uncharted waters. I just remember feeling the need to up the ante, or throw in the towel altogether. In fact, I specifically recollect thinking that I'd give this vegan thing a whirl, fully believing that it *wouldn't work*, thereby paving a return to eating my beloved cheeseburgers. If such came to pass, I'd be comforted by the thought that I'd tried everything.

Full disclosure: The word "vegan," because it is so heavily associated with a political point of view and persona utterly at odds with how I perceived myself, was one that I couldn't first get comfortable with. I've always been left-leaning politically. But I'm also the further thing from a hippie or earthy-crunchy type—the sort of person that the word "vegan" has always conjured in my mind. Even today, I struggle a little with the term "vegan" as it applies to me. Yet despite everything, there I was, giving it a shot. What followed was a miracle, altering my life's trajectory forever.

When I began my post-cleanse vegetarian phase, I found the elimination of meat from my diet not that difficult. I barely noticed the difference. But the removal of dairy? Different story altogether. I considered giving myself occasional permission to enjoy my beloved cheese and milk. What on earth is wrong with a nice cold glass of milk, anyway? Could there be anything healthier? Not so fast. As I began to study food more intently, I was amazed by what I discovered. Dairy, it turns out, is linked to heart disease, Type 1 diabetes, the formation of hormone-related cancers, congestive problems, rheumatoid arthritis, iron deficiency, certain food allergies, and—as counterintuitive as it sounds—osteoporosis. Simply put, dairy had to go. But the task became even more daunting when further study unearthed just how much of what I ate (and what most people eat, for that matter) contained some form of a dairy product or derivative. For example, did you know that most breads contain amino acid extracts derived from whey protein, a by-product of cheese production? And that whey protein or its dairy cousin, casein, can be found in most boxed cereals, crackers, nutrition bars, veggie "meat" products, and condiments? I certainly didn't. And what about my beloved muffins? Forget it.

As my eyes began to widen, I was once again back in rehab—at least, it felt that way.

The first few days were brutal, the cravings severe. I found myself just staring at the wedge of cheddar still in the fridge, transfixed. Burning with envy, I glared at my daughter as she sucked on her bottle of milk. Driving past a pizza parlor, I could feel my mouth watering as the saliva literally pooling in my mouth.

But if I knew anything, it was how to weather a detox. This was familiar territory. And in a perverse sort of way, I welcomed the painful challenge.

Fortunately, after only a week, the cravings for cheese and even that glass of milk dissipated. And at ten days in, I was surprised to recapture the full extent of the vibrancy I experienced during the cleanse. In this interim period, my sleep patterns were uneven, yet I was buffeted by skyrocketing energy levels. Overcome by a sense of wellness, I quite literally started bouncing off the walls. Previously too lethargic to engage Mathis in an evening game of hide-and-seek, I was now feverishly chasing her around the house until she collapsed from exhaustion—no small feat! And out in the yard, I found myself for the first time practicing soccer drills with Trapper. Clearly, my desire to prove this vegan thing pointless had failed. Instead, I was sold.

For the first time in nearly two decades I began working out almost daily—running, biking, and swimming. I had no thought of returning to competitive sports; I was just getting in shape. After all, I was closing in on forty-one. Any desire I had to compete in something physical had dried up in my early twenties. I simply needed a healthy channel to burn off my energy reserves. Nothing more.

Then came what I like to call *the Run*.

About a month into my vegan experiment, I headed out early one spring morning for what was intended to be an easy trail run on nearby “Dirt Mulholland”—a tranquil but hilly nine-mile stretch of fire road that cuts along the pristine ridgeline atop the hills of Topanga State Park near Los Angeles. Connecting Calabasas to Bel Air and Brentwood beyond, it’s an oasis of untouched nature smack in the middle of L.A.’s sprawl, a wide sandy home to scurrying rabbits, coyotes, and the occasional rattlesnake, which offers stunning views of the San Fernando Valley, the Pacific Ocean, and downtown. I parked my truck and stretched a bit, then started my run. I didn’t plan on running more than an hour at the most. But it was a beautiful day, and feeling energized by the clean air, I let myself go.

And go.

I didn’t just feel good; I didn’t just feel amazing. I felt *free*. As I ascended shirtless, the welcome sensation of the warm sun baking my shoulders, time folded in on itself as if I’d seemingly lost all conscious thought, the only sound that of my easy breath and my legs pumping effortlessly beneath me. I recall later thinking, *This must be what it means to meditate*. I mean really meditate. For the first time in my life, I felt that sense of “oneness” I’d only previously read about in spiritual texts. Indeed, I was having an out-of-body experience.

So instead of turning back after thirty minutes as I’d planned, I kept running, with a mirror switched off but a spirit fully engaged. At two hours in, I was painlessly cruising over rolling grasslands above Brentwood and the famed Getty Museum, without a soul in sight. And as if being aroused from a sleepwalk, I slowly began to come out of my trance-like state to find myself transfixed by the dip and rise of a hawk flying overhead. A moment later the realization hit—I was still running *away* from my truck! *What is going on? What am I doing so far away from home? Am I nuts? It’s only a matter of minutes before my calf seizes up in a cramp and I’m lying facedown in a meadow in the middle of nowhere without a phone or any way home. What if I get bitten by a rattlesnake?* But I didn’t care. I didn’t want this feeling to end. Ever.

I crested a small hill to see a fellow runner coming my way—the first person I’d seen since that morning. As he passed, he gave me a quick nod and a gentle thumbs-up. There was just something about this tiny gesture that was profound. It was barely noticeable. Yet it was everything, some kind of message—from above, perhaps—touching my soul. It let me know not just that I’d be okay, but that I was on the right track—that, in fact, this wasn’t just a run. It was the beginning of a new life.

I did turn around, eventually, even though I really didn’t want to. It certainly wasn’t out of fatigue, dehydration, or fear, but because I realized I’d scheduled an important conference call that I couldn’t responsibly skip. As I ascended a particularly steep hill on my journey back, reason told me I should at least slow down a bit. Or better yet, why not stop and take a break? Instead, I accelerated, chasing a rabbit that scurried out of the brush and harnessing the power in my legs and lungs that I’d had no idea I possessed. I was on top of the world—both energetically and literally—peering down on the Valley far below as I painlessly hurled

myself up a sandstone ridge, fluidly cresting yet another steep, craggy ascent, bearing the full brunt of what was now the midday desert sun without notice or care. And not only did I make it back to my truck in one piece, I felt superb right to the very end, even quickening my pace over the last five miles to a flat-out, downhill sprint, my dust-covered running shoes kicking up bits of gravel in my wake. *I was flying.*

When I arrived where I'd begun almost four hours earlier, I was overcome by an absolute certainty that I could have kept going all day. Without ingesting any water or food as I went, I'd run what I later discovered (after reviewing trail maps) was in excess of twenty-four miles—the farthest I'd ever run in my life by a long shot. For a guy who hadn't run more than a few easy miles in countless years, it was remarkable.

It wasn't until much later that I'd fully appreciate the extent and impact of the morning. But as I showered the grit and grime from my worn legs that afternoon, my body hummed with excitement and possibility. And without conscious thought, a huge grin spread across my face. In this moment I knew one thing for certain: I'd soon be seeking a challenge—and it would be a big one. This middle-aged guy—who'd just run a huge distance, who'd just awakened something inside himself, something that was fierce and tough and wanted to win—this guy would soon be making a return to athletics. And not just for fun. To actually *be competitive. To contend.*

## CHLORINE DREAMS

Long before I'd ever met Julie or heard the word "vegan" or thought about running up a hill—before, even, I'd run one step, not to mention walked—I swam. I had yet to reach my first birthday when my mom hoisted my scrawny, diapered body off the cement deck of the neighborhood swimming pool and launched me into deep water, leaving me to thrash and struggle. Not until I was about to drown did she come to the rescue, scooping me up as I gasped for air. But I didn't cry. Instead, she tells me, I just smiled and cast a glance that, in her interpretation, could mean only one thing—*When can I do that again?*

I can't say I remember the moment, but I wish I did. What she did may seem harsh, but her motivation was pure: She simply wanted to give me a love of the water. It was the same love that defined her father and my namesake—a man who died long before I was born yet, I later come to understand, embodied so much of who I'd soon become.

Thus began my own lifelong love affair with water—a passion that would carry me far, yet prove no match for the grip of addiction. It was a devotion I'd rediscover in sober middle age, once again floating my life with meaning and purpose.

Long before that day, Nancy Spindle was a cheerleader with a deep tan, twinkling brown eyes, and short-cropped dark hair, swirling pom-poms for her high school sweetheart Dave Roll, who played center for the Grosse Pointe High football team. The year was 1957, when life could seem at times like a series of scenes out of *American Graffiti*. Affectionately known as "Muffin," my father was a hardworking senior with big dreams, a popular school leader, and textbook match for the cute girl with the kind smile known as "Spinner," a few years his junior.

Despite the years and miles that divided them when my father enrolled in Amherst College in 1958, they successfully kept their courtship going and were reunited when my father returned to go to law school at the University of Michigan, where my mother was still an undergraduate and a member of the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority.

Diligently studying through the summer months, Dad completed his law school courses early, married Spinner, and settled into law-firm life back home in Grosse Pointe, with a modest house in the suburbs and a white Dodge Dart in the driveway. It wasn't long after that I entered the world, on October 20, 1966. With my birth came no indication that I had a future in athletics. In fact, all evidence was to the contrary. I was a frail baby, rawboned and often ill, prone to earaches and allergy attacks; a cross-eyed weakling and regular at the local pediatrician's office.

My earliest memory surrounds the birth of my younger sister Mary Elizabeth, two years my junior. Fearing that I'd feel "left out," my parents bought me a toy garage set. Frankly, I don't remember feeling any inkling of abandonment. Instead, I relished the alone time with my toys, the chance to become deeply immersed in something. It was an attitude that foretold the loner I'd later become. As it turned out, Molly, unlike me, was a robust baby.

strong and full of vigor. Affectionately known at the time as “Butter Ball” (a nickname my now beautiful sister would rather forget), she, and not I, was the safer bet to one day be the Roll child who covered herself in athletic glory.

In 1972, when I was six, my father was offered a position with the Antitrust Division of the Federal Trade Commission, and we settled into the middle-class suburban enclave known as Greenwich Forest in Bethesda, Maryland, just outside D.C. It was a safe neighborhood that teemed with young families, and I distinctly remember the cherry blossom trees that canopied the streets in white and pink during spring. I began first grade at the local public school, Bethesda Elementary. And the three years that followed marked my descent down the public school system’s academic chute and into the rabbit hole of prepubescent social exile. New to town and feeling overwhelmed by the forty-plus kids crammed into each classroom, I was surpassingly shy. It was easy for me to withdraw into a dreamworld—and so I did.

Worsening my situation was an outward appearance that made it even harder to fit in. In an effort to strengthen the weak left eye that had left me cross-eyed since birth, I wore beneath my thick horn-rimmed glasses an eye patch over my stronger right eye. And if that wasn’t enough, I had to wear orthodontic headgear—a 1970s torture contraption in which heavy metal wire emanated from my mouth and ran across my cheeks, where it was pulled tight by an elastic head strap. Then there was the *playground*—that awful coliseum of pain. Even with corrective eyewear, I’ve always lacked any semblance of hand-eye coordination. To this day, I can’t throw or catch a ball to save my life. Needless to say, I was always the kid picked last for any game—whether it was softball, touch football, or basketball. Tennis? Forget it. Golf? You must be kidding. I was—and still am—terrible at all of them. So I usually found the kickball bouncing off the glasses that shielded my patched eye. In an effort to correct this terrible wrong, I joined the local soccer team. And my football-loving father even volunteered to coach. Not only was I hopeless, I was completely uninterested. Typically, I could be found staring off at some bird flying overhead or sitting down in the middle of the game picking daisies. Soccer was not for me. In fact, it looked as though I had no future in sports whatsoever.

In retrospect, I can’t say I blame the other kids for making fun of me. I made it too easy for everyone. I stuck out like a sore thumb: a weakness that had to be rooted out, put on display, and exploited as part of the natural order of things. Kids will be kids. But the inevitability of it all didn’t salve my intense pain. At the school bus stop just up the street from my house, Tommy Birnbach, Mark Johnson, and a band of older kids would shove me, fully aware that I wouldn’t strike back. And whether it was on the bus or in the school cafeteria, I generally sat alone. During winter months, the kids would make a hilarious daily game out of stealing the wool beanie that I wore. On countless occasions I’d slink home from the bus after school defeated and hatless, my head hung low, and cry in the warm embrace of my mother’s arms.

And as I continued to withdraw, my grades followed suit. I didn’t care about what was happening in the classroom. The academic train was pulling out of the station. It was only third grade, but I was already quickly getting left behind.

Solace came during the summer months, when my family would vacation in quaint cottages on Lake Michigan with my beloved cousins, or at Deep Creek Lake in rural Maryland. And during Washington downtime, I could generally be found at Edgemoor, our local neighborhood swim and tennis club. Times were different back then: Mom would simply drop

off my sister and me at Edgemoor in the morning and leave us there all day under the guidance of the lifeguards, only to pick us up when it got dark. I officially joined my first swim team at the age of six, dog-paddling my way across the pool to modest results at summer-league meets. But the results didn't matter. From the moment Mom submerged my infant self, I loved everything about the water. From the smell of chlorine to the whistles of the lifeguards, I relished it all. Most of all, I loved the silence of submersion—that womblike feeling of protection that enveloped me when underwater. What can I say—there was a feeling of completeness, *of being home*. And so, left to my own devices, I learned to swim.

And then I learned to swim fast.

By the time I was eight, I was winning local summer-league swim team races with regularity. I'd stumbled into something I was actually good at. I enjoyed being part of a team, but more important, I loved the self-determination of it all. The idea that hard work and discipline left me solely responsible for the result—win or lose—was a revelation.

Summer-league swim team meets were the highlight of my youth. I felt part of something meaningful, but more important, I was having fun. The Edgemoor team was composed of kids of all ages, from six to eighteen. I looked up to the older kids, even idolized a few, especially Tom Verdin, a Harvard-bound Adonis who seemed to own every pool record and win every race he entered. He was a great swimmer, and smart. *Someday I'm going to be a great swimmer just like Tom*, I thought. And so I followed him around like a lost puppy, relentlessly pestering him until he took me under his wing. *How did you get so fast? How long can you hold your breath? I'm gonna go to Harvard, too!* And on and on. But to his great credit, Tom patiently mentored me. He made me feel special—that I could be someone like him. Before leaving for Harvard, he even gave me his swimsuit—a suit he'd worn in many a victory. It was a passing of the torch, and meant the world to me. I'll never forget that. *Screw those kids at the bus stop*, I thought. In this world, I could be myself. I could look people in the eye and smile. I could even excel.

At the age of ten, I set my first true athletic goal—to win the local summer-league title in the ten-and-under age bracket of the 25-meter butterfly. I even sacrificed my beloved summer vacation on Lake Michigan, staying home with my dad to attend practices in preparation as my sister and mom headed north for July. Unfortunately, I didn't win the race, ending up second by a fingernail to my nemesis Harry Cain. But my time of 16.9 seconds was a team record—a record set in 1977 that would stand for the better part of the next thirty years. And the narrow loss gave me a sense of unfinished business, of work to be done. From that moment forward, I was in with 100 percent of everything I had. *I was a swimmer*.

In an effort to address my rapidly disintegrating academic and social life, my parents made the wise decision to pull me out of public school. And so I entered the fifth grade at St. Patrick's Episcopal Day School, a parochial school on the outskirts of Georgetown—a move that literally saved me. The staff at St. Patrick's created a nurturing and supportive environment with small class sizes that catered to the individual. For the first time, I felt like I fit in. My grades quickly picked up and I made friends. My fifth-grade teacher, Eric Sivertsen, even showed up at my swim meets during the summer to cheer me on. It was a long way from staring at my feet at the bus stop.

Meanwhile, my swimming improved. I even began practicing year-round on a team made up of friendly kids at the local YMCA.

But things would soon take a turn for the worse. After completing elementary school at St. Patrick's, I once again had to try to fit in at a new school. The year was 1980, and I'd just entered my first year at the Landon School for Boys—a prep school Shangri-la that boasted perfectly manicured playing fields, stonemasonry, and country lanes lined with large rock painted blinding white. Widely considered one of Washington's most prestigious all-boys prep schools, Landon was—and in many ways still is—a machismo paradise. It's a preppy haven known as much for its football and lacrosse prowess as its Ivy League matriculation rate.

Unfortunately, I didn't play lacrosse—or football. And despite my developing mastery of the chlorine currents, I was still the awkward nerd with the thick glasses, quietly toting a dog-eared copy of *Catcher in the Rye* while my tweed-jacketed, madras tie-donning classmates practiced lacrosse skills on open fields. I was proud, though, that I had been accepted into this unparalleled academic institution, and so were my parents. By this time my father had moved into private practice with the Steptoe & Johnson law firm. And my mother, fresh off receiving her master's degree in special education at American University after years of night school, taught children with learning disabilities at Washington's Lab School. But even with the increase in income, my parents had to dig deep into their savings to pay Landon's steep tuition. The education that students received there was a golden ticket to a bright future, and I'll never forget my parents' willingness to sacrifice to ensure a great outcome for me. The only problem? I didn't fit in. I was water in a sea of oil.

It's not that I didn't try. It was during the winter months of the seventh grade—what Landon still calls "Form I"—that I decided to try out for the middle school basketball team. If you could have seen me back then in all my inelegant and maladroit glory, you'd have considered this a bold move. By some bizarre stroke of fate I managed to survive the cuts and become the last person named to the team. The problem was, I had no place among the varsity crew, many of whom had been playing together since their first days at Landon, all the way back to the third grade. I was proud that I'd made the squad, but confused, knowing I was way over my head. And I was resented for bouncing a longtime peer from the lineup. On the court, I was simply awful. I couldn't run the plays. I froze up. Tense and anxiety-ridden, I habitually pass the ball to the opposing team. Throwing up air balls was routine. And despite practicing at home with my dad, who'd erected a hoop in our driveway in support, I was hopeless. And I paid for it with relentless ridicule. Soon I was the butt of every joke. And beatings would quickly follow.

One day in the locker room after practice, I suddenly found myself surrounded and wearing only a towel. A group of my teammates circled close. Todd Rollap, twice my strength, stepped forward and got right in my face.

"You don't belong here. Time to quit the team and just go back where you came from."

"Just leave me alone, Todd," I replied, cowering.

Todd laughed. My teammates circled tighter, poking me in the chest, taunting me to do something. And I obliged, finally shoving Todd, who was standing right in my face. *Game on!* My teammates shoved back, pushing me around like this was a game of hot potato.

"Get off me! Go away! Leave me alone!" I cried. Sensing weakness, the throng cheered for blood and moved in for the kill. In a last-ditch effort to escape, I took a swing at Todd but missed his face entirely. Predictable. Like my jump shot, nothing but air.

Then *BOOM!* Todd landed one right on my jaw. The next thing I remember I was lying on

my back, staring up at my teammates, who were laughing hysterically at my embarrassing crumple. They were chanting what would become a mantra of ridicule. "*Rich Roll—man under control! Rich Roll—man under control!*"

Half-naked, horrified, and utterly humiliated, I grabbed my clothes and ran crying from the locker room, bringing the curtain down on one of my countless vintage Landon moments.

The next day Coach Williams pulled me aside into an empty classroom. "I heard about what happened. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I replied, doing my best to hold back the emotions that were boiling inside.

"Do you know why I wanted you on the team?" he asked, his balding forehead glistening. He peered at me through his John Lennon-esque wire-rimmed glasses. I stared back at his mustache blankly. Given what had occurred, I couldn't think of a single reason. I didn't want anything to do with Landon anymore, let alone basketball. "It's not because of your ability to play the game," he continued. *You think?!* "It's because you're a leader. You have a rare enthusiasm and a contagious optimism. The team needs that."

Maybe so. But I didn't need the team. That much I knew. And I couldn't understand why he saw me as a leader. By my account, I lacked any evidence of such skills.

"But I understand if you want to quit. It's up to you."

I badly wanted to quit. But I also knew that if I did, my fate would be sealed. I'd never hear the end of it. And so I agreed to stick it out. It was far from pleasant. The ridicule continued—escalated even. But I did my best to stand my ground. I couldn't let them win.

But what I *did* do was do what I did best. Withdraw. From that day forward through high school graduation, I opted out of everything social that Landon had to offer. I kept my head down, studied hard, and found myself entirely alone. I'd reap what I could academically from Landon, but that was it.

By fifteen, I'd outgrown what the YMCA had to offer my development as a swimmer. If I wanted to play with the big boys, it was time to step it up. And even if Landon had a swimming program—which they didn't—I needed the guidance of an expert hand to take whatever talent I had to the next level.

And so I announced to my parents that I wanted to join the Curl Swim Club, an outfit newly formed by Coach Rick Curl, who'd begun his career launching athletes to the national level with crosstown rival Solotar Swim Club and had now struck out on his own with a new team. At the Y, I'd been a big fish in a small pond. At Curl, I'd be the smallest fish in the biggest pond available to me. Not only would every swimmer my age eclipse my talent and ability, I'd be required to attend ten swim workouts a week—four seventy-five-minute sessions before school, five two-hour weekday sessions after school, and a three-hour workout every Saturday. Daunting, for certain. And my parents were responsibly concerned and unsure about whether such a huge commitment was in my best interest. For them, education was king, and they understandably didn't want this megadose of swimming to undermine my grades, which were finally beginning to head in the right direction. But I convinced them I could make it work. And I knew that if I gave it my all, the sky was the limit. Rick could take me there. But most of all, I was desperate to be away from anything and everything Landon.

There was only one hitch in the plan. Landon was very proud of its mandatory after-school sports program. Every student was *required* to play a school sport when the classroom bells rang at 3 P.M. No exceptions. I needed to find an end run around this rule if I wanted to swim.



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