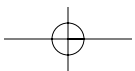
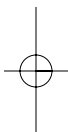
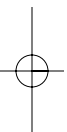


Part One



Chapter 1

The Long Road to Santa Cruz

Sleep is for wimps.

—Christopher Gaylord,
underground ultra-endurance legend

Napa Valley, California

Friday evening, September 29, 2000

It was approaching midnight as I wove up the deserted road, wearing nothing more than a pair of shorts and a sleeveless vest, a cell phone tucked in a pocket of my pack. It had been hours since I'd last had contact with humanity, and the night air was silent and warm. By the light of the full moon, I could see grapevines along my path and hear them rustle in the breeze. But I wasn't fully appreciating the view; I kept thinking about food. I

was famished. Earlier tonight, I'd eaten a bowl of macaroni and cheese, a large bag of pretzels, two bananas, a PowerBar, and a chocolate éclair. But that was more than three hours ago. On big occasions like this one, I needed more food. And I needed it *now*.

At less than 5 percent body fat, my body is ripped like a prizefighter's, nothing left to shed. My diet is strict—high protein, good fats, no refined sugar, only slowly metabolized carbs—but tonight I had to be reckless. Without massive caloric binges—burgers, french fries, ice cream, pies and cakes—my metabolism would come to a screeching halt and I'd be unable to accomplish my mission.

Right now, it craved a big, greasy pizza.

The problem was, I hadn't had access to food in the past few hours. I was heading west through the remote outskirts of Sonoma, well off the beaten path, no food in sight. Proceeding farther from civilization, I'd watched the signal indicator on my cell phone diminish to the point of no reception, severing my contact with the outside world. Midnight was nearing, and I was ravaged.

The night air was dry and fresh, and, despite my hunger, I was able to enjoy the tranquillity of the surroundings. It was a rare moment of serenity in an otherwise frenetic life. At times I found myself mesmerized by the full moon illuminating the hillsides.

At others all I could think about was finding the next 7-Eleven.

When I left the office early today, I received backslaps and hoots of encouragement from several co-workers, most of whom are aware of my *other* life. One minute I was all business, discussing revenue forecasts and corporate strategy in my neatly pressed Friday casuals. The next I was jamming out the door like a wired teenager, psyched about the upcoming weekend festivities. I'd learned to switch from work mode to play mode in the span of several paces. I liked my job plenty, but I *loved* what I was about to do.

At 5:00 P.M., I pushed a button on my stopwatch and the mission was afoot, so to speak. It started in the bucolic little town of Calistoga at the northern reaches of the Napa Valley. The afternoon was warm and cloudless as the townsfolk milled about stoically. One guy tipped his hat and said "Howdy" as I passed, and a lady sweeping the sidewalk with a reed broom stopped and smiled. They were friendly enough, though judging from the peculiar looks I received it was clear I was being sized up: *We know he's not here to cause trouble, but what, exactly, is he doing?*

Alongside me in our VW campervan (aka the Mother Ship) was my family: my parents, my wife, Julie, and our two kids, Alexandria and Nicholas. The Mother Ship would be our operational "brain center" for the next three days. That, however, implies a level of sleekness that didn't exist. The Mother Ship was more like a roam-

ing funhouse, cluttered with maps, toys, travel magazines, binoculars, and homemade bug-catching jars. Between the seats were pieces of Fig Newtons and stale Goldfish dusted with beach sand. It was the perfect anti-feng shui environment, and we loved it.

Macaroni and cheese from a box was easy to cook on the Mother Ship's small stove, and that's what we'd had for dinner tonight. Because of my two lives, we didn't eat together as a family as often as I liked, so I treasured this meal—dehydrated cheese or not.

We were like any other happy family having dinner together, only we were sitting on the guardrail on the side of a highway. The kids didn't seem to find it strange—they didn't know any different, really—and my parents had grown accustomed to sipping wine from a paper cup while balancing on the narrow railing as cars whizzed by. There wasn't too much traffic on the road tonight, so we engaged in pleasant dinner conversation.

I had seconds and thirds, and then I finished the rest of my wife's meal. Dessert followed: two bananas, a PowerBar, and a chocolate éclair.

"I hate to dine and ditch," I said, not pausing long enough to sit down, "but I've got to be moving along."

"Daddy, are you going to be gone all night again?" my daughter Alexandria asked. Her big brown eyes filled with enthusiastic curiosity, as if trying to understand why her daddy had this odd yearning that wasn't shared by many other daddies.

“Yes, sweetie, I am. But we’ll have breakfast together tomorrow morning.”

Although that conversation was just a few hours ago, it now seemed like a long time back. Nearing midnight, they would now all be happily asleep inside the Mother Ship as I made my way through Sonoma and continued west toward the town of Petaluma.

Known for its thrift stores and bowling alleys, Petaluma isn’t a bustling metropolis. But to its credit, the town does have a Round Table Pizza, one of the greatest franchises on the planet.

You see, other pizza companies are not as flexible as Round Table. Most of them have complicated delivery rules and policies—picky little things like requiring you to provide a street address in order to have a pizza delivered. Imagine that—you actually have to tell them exactly where you are! Round Table, on the other hand, will deliver a pizza to just about anywhere.

Over the years, I’ve pushed the envelope with Round Table, and they’ve consistently outperformed all other pizza chains. I was so confident in their pizza-delivering prowess that I once even had them bring one to my house.

Cresting the peak and seeing that my cell phone now had service, I dialed. The signal was weak.

“Round Table,” a young voice answered. Loud rock music blared in the background.

“I need to order a pizza.”

“What’s that? You need a pizza?”

Why else would anybody be calling the Round Table delivery line? “*YES, I NEED TO ORDER A PIZZA! I NEED PIZZA!*”

“Okay, dude, no need to scream.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s all right. I know how edgy people get about their pizza.”

“I’m not edgy, I’m just hungry,” I said in a very edgy tone.

“Whatever, dude. Just be assured that we’re going to get you the tastiest grinds imaginable. I’m the manager. Now what’s it gonna be?”

“I’ll take the Hawaiian style, with extra cheese. Extra olives. Extra ham. Oh yeah . . . extra pineapple, too.”

“Extra everything? I’ll throw it all on there. What size you after?”

This was a tricky question. I didn’t have the means to carry any uneaten portions, but if I ordered too little, I’d run out of fuel and never reach Marin before sunrise.

“How many does a large feed?”

“Five, with all those extras. How many in your party?”

“It’s just me. I’ll take the large.”

“Cannonball, dude! You must be operating on some kind of hunger.”

If you only knew, I thought. “Do you have dessert?”

“Cherry cheesecake. It’s killer—I tested some earlier tonight.”

“Okay, I’ll have one.”

“One slice?”

“No, I want the whole damn thing.”

“Dude, this is epic!”

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

“Twenty, thirty minutes. You in some kind of rush?”

“No rush, really, I’ll be out here a while. I just need to know how long it’ll take so I can tell you where to meet me.”

“Okay . . . I guess. Let’s say twenty-five minutes.”

“Then I’ll meet you at the corner of Highway 116 and Arnold Drive.”

“What, right on the corner?” he asked. “That’s a pretty lonely stretch of highway. What color’s your car?”

“I’m not in a car,” I said. “But I’ll be easy to spot. I’m the only one out here running.”

“Running?” There was a brief moment of silence. “Is someone chasing you?”

“No,” I laughed.

“But it’s midnight!” he said.

“Yes, it’s late. And that’s why I need pizza. I’m starving.”

“Got it.” [Long pause.] “Makes perfect sense. Is there anything else I can bring you?”

“Is there a Starbucks in town?”

“Yeah, but I’m sure they’re closed by now. But I’ve got my own stash of beans right here. I’ll brew some up while the pizza’s cooking. You just keep running straight on Highway 116 and we’ll track you down.”

After giving him my cell number and hanging up, I

put my head down and kept plowing into the darkness. If they were going to locate me along the route, there was no need to wait on the corner, which was a good thing. Standing idle in the evening air was a sure way to invite a debilitating leg cramp.

Replacing my cell phone in the back pocket of my pack, I pulled out the picture of a little girl. Even with tubes and needles stuck all over her body, her face looked vibrant. But she *was* sick; in fact, she was near death, and I was running to help save her. I took one final look at the picture and tucked it carefully away again.

Exactly twenty-five minutes later, a dusty pickup truck with oversized tires came barreling down the road. My pizza had arrived. To my surprise, the young manager was behind the wheel.

“*Dude!*” he cried, jumping out of the car. “You’re mad. This is awesome!”

He pulled the pizza off the passenger seat and opened the box. It was masterfully crafted, almost as high as it was wide, with lots of pineapple and olives piled on top. It looked like something you’d feed a rhinoceros. I paid the tab, thanked him, and prepared to charge on.

“You’re gonna keep running?” he asked. “Don’t you want a lift?”

“Now that I’ve got some fuel,” I answered, holding up the food, “I’m going to put it to good use.”

“But how far are you gonna go?”

“I’m headed to the beach,” I said.

“To the beach!” he cried. “Dude, Bodega Bay’s at least thirty miles from here!”

Actually, I was heading to the beach in Santa Cruz—over 150 miles from here—but I didn’t think either of us was prepared to face up to that reality.

“I can’t believe it’s humanly possible to run thirty miles,” he gasped. “Are you like Carl Lewis or something?”

“Ah . . . yeah,” I replied. “I’m like Carl Lewis, only slower.”

“Where will you sleep?”

“I won’t.”

“You’re running straight through the night? This is insane. I love it!” He jumped back in his truck. “I can’t wait to tell the guys back at the shop.” He sped off.

I liked this kid. To most non-runners, running is at best boring and at worst terribly painful and senseless. But he seemed genuinely intrigued by the venture, and we’d connected on an almost primal level, though I didn’t sense he’d take up the sport anytime soon.

With the cheesecake stacked on top of the pizza, I started running again, eating as I went. Over the years I’d perfected the craft of eating on the fly. I balanced the box of pizza and cheesecake in one hand and ate with the other. It was a good upper-body workout. Fortunately my forearms were well developed and had no

problem supporting the added weight. For efficiency, I rolled four pieces of pizza into one big log like a huge Italian burrito. Easier to fit it in my mouth that way.

Just as I was finishing this first course, I heard the manager's truck approaching again. The loose muffler was a dead giveaway. He'd forgotten to give me the coffee. We filled one of my water bottles with the dark brew and I drank the rest. I tried to pay him for it, but he wouldn't take any money.

As he was about to drive away again, the young man tilted his head out of the truck window and asked, "So dude, do you mind me asking *why* you're doing this?"

Where to begin? "Oh man," I replied, "I'll have to get back to you on that one."

And now's the time to ponder his question. Millions of Americans run. They run for the exercise, for their cardiovascular health, for the endorphin high. In 2003, a record-setting 460,000 people completed one of the country's many marathons. They pushed the outer limits of their endurance to complete the 26.2 miles.

Then there's the small hardcore group of runners, a kind of runners' underground, who are called ultramarathoners. For us, a marathon is just a warm-up. We run 50-mile races, 100-mile races. We'll run twenty-four hours and more without sleep, barely pausing for food and water, or even to use the bathroom. We run up and

down mountains; through Death Valley in the dead of summer; at the South Pole. We push our bodies, minds, and spirits well past what most humans would consider the limits of pain and exertion.

I'm one of the few who's run beyond 100 miles without resting, which I guess makes me an extra-ultramarathoner. Or just nuts. Whenever people hear that I've run 100 miles at a clip, they inevitably ask two questions. The first is "How can you do that?" The second, and much harder to answer, is the same one that pizza guy asked me: "*Why?*"

It's an excellent question, though addictions are never neatly defined. When asked why he was attempting to be the first to climb Mount Everest, George Mallory offered the famously laconic, "Because it's there." That seems to satisfy people enough for it to have become a famous adage. But it's really not much of an answer. Still, I can understand Mallory's clipped response. When people ask me why I run such improbable distances for nights on end, I've often been tempted to answer with something like, "Because I can." It's true as far as it goes, and athletes aren't always the most introspective souls. But it's not a complete answer. It's not even satisfying to me. I've got questions of my own.

What am I running from?

Who am I running for?

Where I am running to?

Every runner has a story. Here's mine.