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TRAIL END

**NOW**

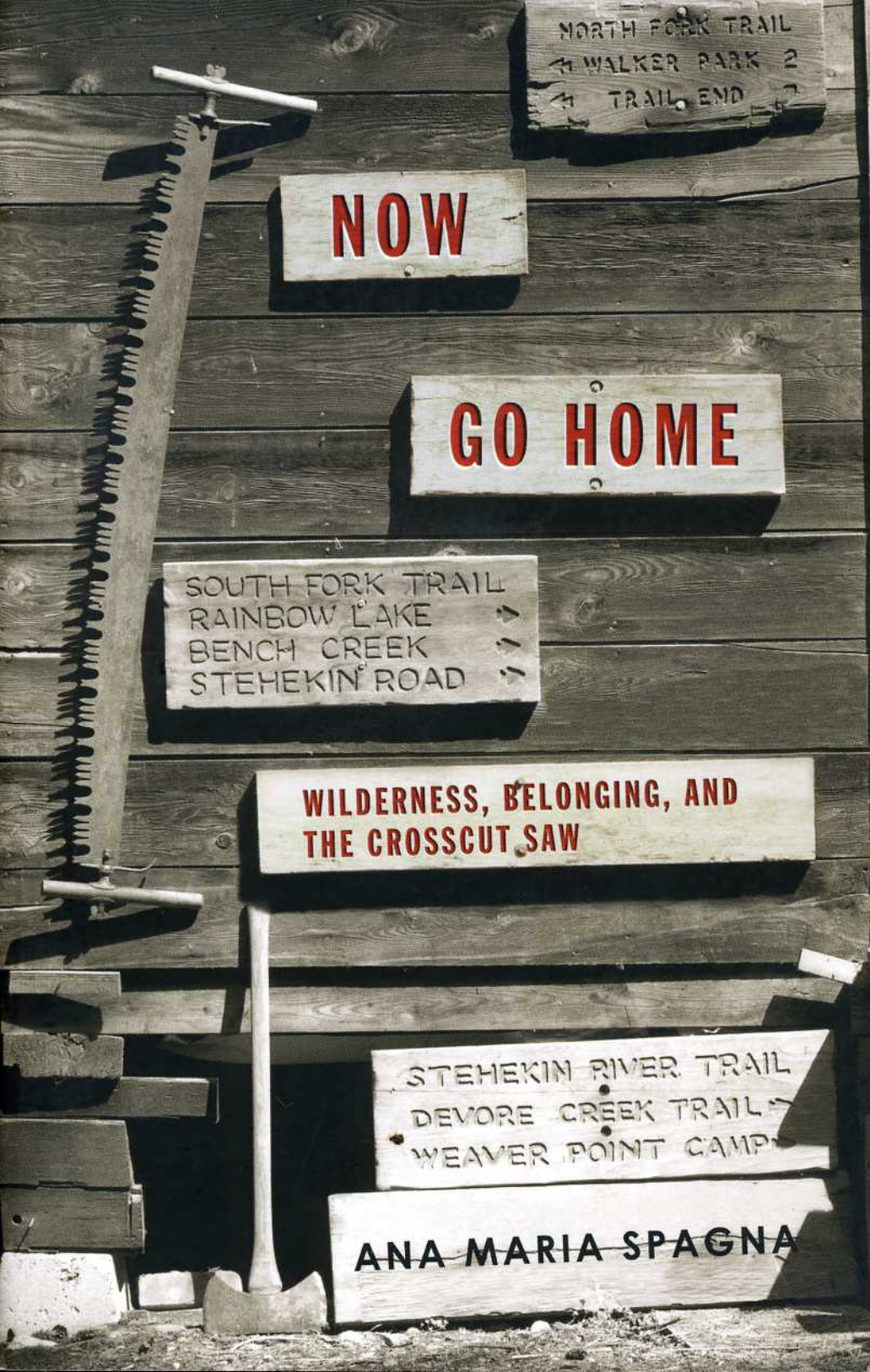
**GO HOME**

SOUTH FORK TRAIL  
RAINBOW LAKE  
BENCH CREEK  
STEHEKIN ROAD

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

STEHEKIN RIVER TRAIL  
DEVORE CREEK TRAIL  
WEAVER POINT CAMP

**ANA MARIA SPAGNA**



## Long Distance



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

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

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

"That's good," Coach Halpin said.

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

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

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

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

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

"O.K.," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And by god I kicked.

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

And I cringed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the neighborhood to the place where a break in a chainlink fence opened out into the hills where we practiced. I looked through the break, a jagged porthole of torn and misshapen metal, and I could see Coach Halpin balancing on one foot flamingo-style with his other foot pulled up behind him, stretching his quad. From where I stood, he looked impossibly skinny and sinister, like a thief. I looked at the hills that I was supposed to run, and I thought I might come back someday all grown up and run over them as easily as flying, the way I did in my dreams, stroking my arms through the air like a swimmer. I looked at the hills, then I turned and studied the row of stoplights, red yellow green, staggered out along California Street, the long road back home. I don't remember deciding. I do remember how it felt to sprint, like the final strides of a long race, how ungraceful I was in triumph with my head lolling back across my shoulders and my chest thrust forward, dragging my legs along. I ran all the way home.

When I got home, my father faced me alone. He was angry.

"Why?" he asked. Why hadn't I been at practice? If I didn't want to go, why hadn't I just told them so?

He had stopped by after work to pick me up, and I was nowhere to be found; they had been worried that something terrible had happened. Now he stood before me, long past dinner time, not even having changed out of his suit from work. His loosened tie hung off-center at his chest. He hesitated.

"Was it too hard?" he asked.

I shook my head. Of course it was not too hard. Running was the easiest thing.

Years later, my mother would try to explain it to me. Running, by then, would not be an easy subject for us to broach. They had worried, she told me, that they had pressured me too much.

"Then why?" my dad asked.

I shifted my weight from foot to foot, and I cried a bit. I didn't have an answer. I don't remember feeling pressured, though I don't think I knew what that meant. I remember that I looked at Coach

Halpin one day and he was not what I had thought he was. And how do you explain that to your dad? I fell silent, and my chest pulled tight as a drum.

I quit running after that. I imagine I spent my time attending slumber parties and watching *Monkees* reruns on TV and listening to my transistor radio, waiting to hear my favorite songs. I played a little tennis. My dad bought me *Young Athlete* magazines, and I taped pictures of the cutest boys to my bedroom wall. I taped up Bjorn Borg, and I taped up Dwight Stones, the great American high jumper with feathered blond surfer hair, famous for wearing Mickey Mouse T-shirts. I loved Dwight Stones. I wanted to be like him. My dad took me to Goodwill to buy a mattress, then to the lumber yard for posts that we'd set in paint cans of cement, then, finally, to the river bottom to cut an eight-foot bamboo pole for the bar so I could practice high jumping in the backyard. Then, inevitably, I started going to track meets.

My backyard pit served me well. We attended a long series of meets, my dad and me, and I collected a box of ribbons, many of them blue. I was tall for my age, though that would change soon enough when all my classmates would shoot up past me and laugh me away from high-school basketball tryouts. At ten I was tall. And I could jump. I had taught myself the Fosbury flop, the backwards-over-the-bar Dwight Stones way to jump, and a skill that obscure gives a fifth-grader some advantage. What freedom there was in soaring face upturned to the sun, then somersaulting wildly, backwards, onto the big blue mat. No eternal plodding, this, but an exuberant surge, an explosion of hope. I went to watch my dad run his half-marathon in some foggy distant hills, and when I met him in the finish chute, there was no hint of his familiar unmitigated glee, only exhaustion and no small measure of relief. He checked his wristwatch as I hugged his waist, then he bent to catch his breath, and I was so glad to have abandoned endurance. High jumping was so easy and so much my own. I felt strong and independent. I taught my dog Junior to jump over the bamboo

pole at its lowest heights, and I could spend hours in the backyard alone with my dog, reveling in my newfound passion, my very own passion, and I could pretend not to notice when my dad was away, out running or, more often, at the hospital—he was having some kind of health problems—and on Saturdays, we could still hit the road, me and Dad. We went to one meet, then the next, and I just kept winning.

Eventually, we ended up at the state age-group championships, at a larger stadium somewhere near Los Angeles, a full stadium, with a rubber track rather than a dirt one. There was noise in the stands, excitement, and I made my way up through the competition, easily clearing one height then the next. When I approached the bar at four-foot-four, it was higher than I'd ever jumped before. It was taller than I was at the time. I ran the semicircle approach, then leapt and arched back into that elaborate airborne backbend and kicked my legs in unison at just the right moment and landed in the huge mat gazing up at the bar. It did not so much as quiver. The fact that I missed at the next height three times in a row didn't matter. I had won third place in the state for fifth-grade girls—a bronze medal!—and during the awards ceremony my dad jumped over the wall from the stands and ran across the rubber track to wrap me in a bear hug. It's one of the clearest memories I have of him. He died a year later of a heart attack while out running, just collapsed there on the sidewalk in his shorts and sneakers and the dorky bandanna. His heart surgeon had told him to give it up after the quadruple bypass. No running, the surgeon said, but my dad didn't listen. Sometimes I am angry. Sometimes I wish I could stand before him alone and ask just this: Why?

At the state meet, they broadcast my name over a loudspeaker when they awarded the medal. I listened to it echo through the crowd, and though I hadn't thought of him in months, I suddenly wished that Coach Halpin were there. I wished he could watch me stand upon the makeshift platform with a medal draped around my neck. I wished it the way you wish revenge. There, I thought, I

showed you. I did it without you. See! See! I did it all by myself! I thought this even though it was patently untrue. And while I was thinking this, right in the middle of it, my dad jumped over the railing. He vaulted actually, like a younger, more agile version of himself, and he sprinted across the track nearly interrupting a race in progress. He lifted me in his arms and spun me around as if I'd scored the winning touchdown. I remember it clearly, and I remember it with something like regret, something like shame, for the way that memory, like love, sometimes clings to all the wrong things. I have precious few memories of my father. I wish like heck I spent more of my Jackson Browne hours holding fast to those memories, nurturing them for posterity, instead of dwelling on Coach Halpin. Inside that package of hurt that obsessed me so much was something, after all, as common as dirt. I fell out of love, out of infatuation probably, out of a plain little girl crush, for godssake. Why doesn't matter a whit. What we learn and what we keep are the prizes.

My running career, short-lived though it was, left me a few. There's a dusty shoebox in a closet at my mother's house with a handful of ribbons and one third-place medal. There's loyalty and tenacity and endurance, evidence that after all this time I am still not fast, never will be, that I am, perhaps, made for distance. There are memories of love, real and imagined, obsessive and embarrassing, solid and lasting, cheering from the sidelines and then running beside me and then passing me by, moving on to places I cannot reach, driven by motives I cannot understand. There are a couple pair of cheap running shoes in my closet at any given time, since I still run occasionally, casually, to stay in shape. And there are Coach Halpin's calves, now my own. They are hard stony knobs, sculpted and gaudy and embarrassingly out of proportion to my smallish frame, and I am not always proud of them, but I am stronger because of them—stronger than I ever dreamed of being—and it's a probably a damned good thing because, when you're eight, you can never dream how strong you'll have to be.