

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
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LIVING TO RUN AND RUNNING TO LIVE:

SHORT ANALYSES AND MEMOIRS ABOUT WHY WE (WANT TO, NEED TO
AND *JUST LOVE TO*) RUN

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ABSTRACT

The following includes two short analyses of running memoirs as well as a collection of short running stories from my own life. The purpose of this project is to analyze and compare multiple running experiences and draw personal conclusions about what motivates people to run and how their experiences differ based on those motives. In this thesis, I explore how running makes people *feel*. How it can build us up, ruin us, destroy us or save us. I look at what motivates people to run and why they are drawn to the sport. I then compare the running experiences of those who use running as an escape, outlet or coping mechanism to those who run purely and simply for fun or pleasure.

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Unchill

I've never understood the adjective "chill" when used to describe a human being. "Yeah, she's a great girl, she's super chill." *What the hell does that even mean?*

I mean, I get it. I get it because I've been told countless times how "unchill" I am—how spastic and uptight and nervous and crazy I am. Yeah,yeah,yeah, I got it. I'm not chill. I never try to be chill. It wouldn't happen even if I tried. Even as I write this, I feel myself getting upset this word will likely never be used to describe me unless preceded by a big fat "UN-".

So I lied. I do totally understand the word *chill*—it's everything I'm not.

Some mornings I wake up because my heart is racing and I can't feel my legs. Usually because I have an exam or quiz (or even a 5 point "pre-lab quiz" worth essentially 0.5% of my total grade) the next day—rational, right? *Unchill*. I'm chronically anxious, that much I know. And I stress about things I fully know don't matter enough to lose sleep over.

I recognize this fact, which only causes me to freak out more.

For a long time, I couldn't control it. I'd wake up and lie in bed and obsess over how quickly my heart was beating and wonder if I was dying an unusual, premature, senseless death.

I used to worry a lot about not being normal. I feared my spastic, paranoid tendencies would destroy my relationships, my sanity, my life.

I tried breathing in and out; tried writing things down; tried crying. But nothing helped. Until I finally found my cure in something I'd done for years almost every single day. Ironically, (though not all that shockingly) the thing that saved me from myself was just myself.

My self in motion.

I'd been running for years and never felt the positive "miracle effects" of a runner's high. I used to run only because I was good at it. Only because it got people's attention and made me feel skinny. I never used to feel good after runs. Just tired and hungry and thin.

Running didn't help me for the first 12 years I did it because I ran for all the wrong reasons. I was running for other people; their approval; their praise. I was running because I desperately wanted to be seen as the super skinny girl who could run like hell. I never thought about how running could save me, *if only I would let it*. It never crossed my mind to use this thing I was so good at to turn my twisted world around.

I used to like those distance running quotes that compare life's burdens to running hills and daily emotional struggles to the blisters and shin splints and stiff, achy muscles

we get around mile 20 of the marathon. I actually used to write them all over post-it notes and stick them on my mirror and laptop case as daily reminders that running equaled sanity; relief. I wanted so badly to believe what those little notes said about pain and suffering and “pushing through to the top of the hard climbs in life.” I wanted running to be the thing that saved me from my insecurities and self-doubt and teenage drama.

It wasn't.

Those neatly printed running quotes on colorful stickies looked pretty on my bedroom vanity mirror, but they didn't apply to me; not then. In some ways, they irritated me more. Saying you're passionate about running doesn't make you passionate about it. Having post-it notes about the miraculous benefits of exercise doesn't mean it's actually saving your life. Maybe it just means you like sappy sticky notes. *Or maybe it means you're trying to convince the people all around you that you actually enjoy this thing you compulsively, obsessively do.*

George Sheehan's memoir, *This Running Life*, could be broken down into thousands of post-it note worthy quotes. In it, Sheehan writes endlessly about how running impacted his life in a way nothing had before—how it molded him into a better person, husband, father and friend. Sheehan adamantly claims only after he began running did he fully understand and love himself. Running saved his life—changed his whole world.

Because for the longest time I didn't really love running the way I pretended to on social media and all over the walls and mirrors of my room, I didn't totally believe Sheehan at first. I leafed through the first few pages of his memoir annoyed and unconvinced by his overzealous passion for running, just for the hell of it. But then I made the distinction between George Sheehan and myself: he ran because he loved it, I ran because I wanted to love myself but couldn't; because I wanted to be noticed and praised and told I was good; because I wanted to be skinny.

Running can't save someone like that.

Sheehan experienced what every distance runner desperately wants (or sometimes just flat out pretends) to find through the sport: personal growth and self-discovery. Though he credits the act of running with saving his life, I don't think it was running itself that changed George Sheehan, at least not totally. Sheehan made running that way for himself, because he ran for all the right reasons.

All the Right Reasons

George Sheehan had a positive, life-altering relationship with running because he did it for himself; he used running as a growing and learning process. In his memoir, Sheehan makes no mention of using running to *prove* himself to the world, to his peers or his community. While he trained hard and vigorously, he did not obsessively push to unnecessary limits or force himself to experience physical or emotional pain. He listened to his body; respected his own physical limitations. Yes, he endured pain, but only for his own self-betterment. Never to excess—never for others. Running, to Sheehan, was a form of “play”—a blissful, utopic daily experience that led to self-discovery and a better life. While he admits he liked to win, Sheehan didn't need to. He didn't purposely cut out a meal as personal punishment if he lost a race or didn't place in his age category. Because his relationship with running was not clouded by the desire to be praised, noticed, loved or lusted after, running *could* be this way for Sheehan. Running to Sheehan, more than anything, was a means to a better end; a better life.

Sheehan willingly admits the sport was not immediately the positive, transformative means to his end. At first, he explains, running made him selfish; turned him “inward.” He defends this process however, arguing running allowed him the unique opportunity to come into closer contact and with himself—to understand who he really was, on a more intimate level. Only after running reintroduced Sheehan to himself could he grow outwardly and use what his running experiences taught him to work on and improve external, interpersonal relationships with others. “We do move inwardly, but

only so we can later move outwardly toward union with others; so that the self we destroy is the false one we have been carrying all these years, the one that is no longer necessary” (Sheehan, 37). Sheehan claims he benefited from running because he understood it as a process. As an amateur runner, he admits he knew little about the sport and even less about himself. Accepting and welcoming the transformative power of an activity centered exclusively on self-awareness and discovery, Sheehan allowed running to act on him. This open attitude led him to filter out the negativity in his life and distinguish between the important and the trivial.

Careful not to mistake running for something equally as sacred as family or relationships, Sheehan does argue those things only became increasingly more meaningful and fulfilling when he came to know, then accept and love *himself* first. “First come fitness and play, energy and self-discovery. We must first be made whole. Then, we can return to the busy world of affairs. We must first go back to being a child before we can do those adult things” (Sheehan, 38). “Becoming whole” for Sheehan, meant learning to unify his mind and body. Running forced him to slowly fuse together the once distinctly separate parts of himself. According to Sheehan, one of his greatest triumphs in his (running) life was developing the discipline to allow his body to take control over the mental weakness and the doubt that so often consumed his mind.

On those days, my mind is in command. I am a reasoning,
calculating human being. I have forgotten I am also my body and
that my body accepts such challenges... On those days, I am not a
runner. I am a mind.

On other days, I gratefully accept the challenge... I let my body take control. Once having willed the action, I am content to receive the messages from the feet and legs and thighs, to hear from the heart and lungs and brain, to listen to why my body tells me, to listen but not to interfere. It has taken years to reach this stage, to become a listener, to learn from my body and teach myself not to inflict my ignorance on it, to allow my body to seek its own perfection. (Sheehan, 23-24)

These small daily defeats or victories of the body and mind did not discourage or upset Sheehan. They fascinated him; taught him. These internal battles prompted him to grow as a runner, and more importantly, a man. “It is, after all, the finite body, my imperfect body, which is trying to express the infinite my soul would have me be. And it is the finite body, which is the first to tell me who I am. Therefore, the mind’s first step to self-awareness must be through the body” (Sheehan, 24). Through running, Sheehan arrived at a greater appreciation for his body. He began to recognize it (and himself as a whole) as imperfect, and came to not only accept, but celebrate that imperfection. Most importantly, Sheehan began to praise his body for its ability to work and fight and triumph against the ever persistent, never-tiring, nagging part of himself—his mind.

I half hated my sticky post-it notes because they were on the mirror. Mirrors forced me to look at my totally undefined jawline (*why the hell couldn't I just have a defined bony jaw like Reese freaking Witherspoon?! I was way skinnier than her and*

definitely worked out more...) I'd look at those post-its and then at my slightly lopsided ears and frail frame and resent what the notes told me:

"Running parallels life: take one challenge at a time; one tough mile at a time; one hill at a time; one aid station at a time, and you will get through anything..."

But I couldn't take them down. Maybe one day they would mean something to me. Maybe one day I would actually believe what those words said.

Leslie Heywood would have hated those sticky notes too. Heywood's running experience was quite different from Sheehan's, and much like mine. In her memoir, *Pretty Good For a Girl*, Heywood explains how for her, running had everything to do with proving herself. She actively and consciously pushed her body to dangerous limits. She suffered through self-inflicted pain to prove a point: that she—the girl—the female—the woman *could*. "I am an athlete, I train with the men. I'm not soft, I've got an athlete's thick skin. Don't ask me to smile and simper, don't ask me to open up and let you in. Look at me, I'm not just a girl, I win races, win races, I can think" (Heywood, 74). Heywood did not have the luxury of running just for fun or personal growth, nor did she enjoy her successes or personal victories. To Leslie Heywood, running meant more.

Heywood ran so her abs would feel tight and Coach Luke would look at her. She ran because she loved seeing her name on the front page of the local paper the next day and because no one could believe she was as fast as the boys, *sometimes even faster*. She ran because she had something to prove—to herself; to everyone.

Heywood didn't love running the way Sheehan did. She loved it the way I did.

If you're running to be a size 00 or because you need the boys to notice you or want to hear your name on the announcements the next day at school for winning all your events, running won't save you. *You have to run for yourself first.*

Like George Sheehan, Leslie Heywood writes about how running made her acutely aware of the relationship between her mind and body. Heywood however, does not describe the euphoria associated with unifying the two parts of the self. Instead, she shares her totally opposite experience. The confrontation between Heywood's mind and body drove her to hate, and eventually, destroy herself. This was Leslie Heywood's relationship with running, because Heywood (not entirely by her own fault) ran for all the *wrong* reasons.

All the Wrong Reasons

Leslie Heywood spent her running career craving validation from men. Though fully aware of her innate abilities, she *needed* to be noticed and praised for her running prowess. Heywood admits when her athletic successes (impressive as they were) went unnoticed or uncelebrated, they felt less real. She writes about how what she yearned for, even more than victory or medals, was self-confidence and respect.

Conflicted between *wanting to be like the boys and wanting the boys to want her*, Heywood failed to gain anything positive from her competitive running experiences. Running did not lead her to a greater understanding of the relationship between her body and mind; it turned her into the worst possible version of herself. In an attempt to combat stereotypes about the athletic incompetence and inferiority of girls, reclaim her dignity after an encounter with her sexually abusive coach and gain self-confidence and respect, Heywood used running as a combative means against the negativity and doubt that surrounded and influenced her. Only when she reached a point of complete emotional and physical destruction did Heywood identify her obsessive running lifestyle (the very thing she turned to for validation and comfort) as the thing actually preventing her from confronting her real issues, while simultaneously introducing more negativity into her already crumbling world.

Heywood's running career began before advocacy for women in sports exploded. Despite her performance at the same level as many of the boys at her high school, she

was not given the same attention or training as the males. Frustrated by the blatant favoritism shown to the boys on her cross-country team, Heywood constantly worked and asked for equal training and practice opportunities. Still, the coaching staff discriminated against and often completely ignored her. She was a girl. To them, she didn't count.

Heywood writes about one memorable instance in the weight room, when her coach physically removed her from a weight bench after she refused to move for one of the boys on the team. "He jerks me off the bench so hard I think for a minute I'm flying, but then my head hits the wall behind me. I stand there, dazed, but his hands are on my hands again and I'm outside before I know it, backed up against the aluminum siding of that football-player gym, glowering like the bad girl whose father's yelling right up in her face" (Heywood, 35). Motivated by her anger from such events, Heywood redirected her frustration into running harder; getting better, faster, and stronger. The more she improved, the more Coach Luke looked at her. But not from a coaching standpoint. Not because he actually wanted to help her as a runner.

Heywood describes her sexual encounter with her high school coach, recounting the conflicting emotions she felt during and following the abuse. When their relationship deteriorated afterwards, Heywood felt abandoned, confused and vulnerable. Unsure of how else to deal with the emotions she felt, Heywood once again turned to running as an outlet; as her one and only weapon against the man who made her feel powerless.

I run and I run until I can't stand up, and I am proud of this. I can hold up under anything, anything at all—give me some more. More and more, and then I'll do that, too. My lungs are liquid and my legs are rubber, and still I will round out the turns of the track,

on time. *See. You can't fuck with me. You thought that you could but just watch me, I can take anything you can dish. Watch me. Just watch. My legs, my pumping arms, the way they curve.*
(Heywood, 59)

Obsessed with proving her worth to Coach Luke, Heywood admits she became consumed by the idea of improving as a runner for him—to show him she could—to show she was worth something. More than anything, Heywood wanted to convince Coach Luke he had not destroyed her. “My times start dropping, and I am exceeding every expectation, everything that is asked and then one further. He has not worn me down, and I feel it in his voice, like a shadow starting to creep its way across concrete: a faint hint of respect, like a promise” (Heywood, 69). Encouraged by these rare glimpses of positive energy and reinforcement from Coach Luke, Heywood kept working—kept improving—kept trying to impress this *man*.

Even when finally approached about reporting the scandal to police, Heywood felt conflicted about what upset her most about her experience with her coach. While most (including her parents) argued Coach Luke’s major offenses were the sexual acts themselves, Heywood felt more distraught about the relationship she had with her coach *outside* of their sexual encounters. What violated and offended Heywood most was the way Coach Luke blatantly dismissed her as an athlete; *as a woman; as a human being*.

He should pay for all of it, for the way before anything happened he looked at me like I didn't exist. For what the tone in his voice, the words under his words, made me into: *You're a girl, so you're*

garbage, not an athlete, no right to be here with my guys on my field. The way he walked like he owned the place: We just use girls for sex, and we don't know why you think you're any different. Come here, little girl. Just who do you think you are? (Heywood, 129)

The way Heywood treated herself—the damage she did in her attempt to prove herself as a serious, competitive athlete, worthy of respect, took a far greater physical and emotional toll on her than Coach Luke's sexual abuse did years prior. According to Heywood, above all, she wanted Coach Luke to pay for the permanent damage of his belittling, destructive attitude towards her. *This* is what caused her the most pain. *This* is what led to her self-destructive behavior—to her breaking point.

Heywood describes starving herself, binge eating, vomiting. Anything to keep the body fat percentage to a minimum; anything to stay lean, perfectly tight—like a *machine*. She talks about how she always felt the male gaze on her. Coach Luke's eyes, her male teammates' or the eyes of perfect strangers; Heywood was convinced they were looking, judging. Like always, she used running as her combative shield against the discomfort and anxiety this caused her. But some days, regardless of her excessive training, starvation and vomiting, she felt distraught in her own skin. No amount of miles could numb the feeling. Alone and trapped, Heywood descended into a place of utter despise for her own body; for herself. She recounts her experience of getting weighed in the locker room in front of football players. About how self-aware it made her; about the

promises she made herself to stay thin; to shed even more fat; to never look like a *normal girl* again.

*Just let them know how much fat I am carrying over these bones
and I will be forever ashamed and I will promise you promise you
not to eat, not to put anything inside me that might slow me down
like potato chips or ice cream or pizza or vodka at midnight or
even frozen yogurt and I will whisk pure I will whisk clean I will
put nothing like this in me and I will turn into the clearest flame so
pure and I will sprout wings upon these feet and I will fly past you,
gone... (Heywood, 146)*

Heywood went on extra runs after practice or before school in the morning. She obsessively counted her intake of calories, making sure to burn as many or more than she consumed. “Each mouthful we consume is a downfall, each mouthful we refuse is a victory, a vindication of our purity and the spread of our bones and flying feet that will take over the warm, warm winds” (Heywood, 147). Heywood’s obsession with becoming the perfect, flawless runner reached far beyond training hard and running fast at practices and meets. It began consuming her whole life and destroying her body. The more she trained and less she ate, the more she deteriorated. Refusing to accept this and ignoring the blatant signs of sheer and utter exhaustion and bodily failure, Heywood ran and starved herself nearly to death.

Heywood only stopped running when a doctor looked her in the eye and told her she would literally die if she continued competing. She describes how initially, without running, she felt dead anyway. Lifeless; worthless.

So what do you do, exactly, when your doctor tells you, ‘That’s it soldier, you’re out of the war?’ Like returning from a trip to find you no longer have a house, my world is gone from me, *place, marking, bones, teeth*. *The reason for strength in my legs and the kind of shoes that I wear on my feet. The kind of ‘I am’ in the back of the throat like a light, the reason to eat, not eat, to breathe, to stretch, to think*. All that is left is the rest...I emerge from running like someone too long underwater. I have to learn to breathe again, to see everything around me... (Heywood, 188)

Heywood couldn’t imagine life without the praise; without randomly being stopped in the grocery store by strangers who recognized her from the front page of the paper. For her, this was the hardest part of losing running. But Heywood eventually moved on, she had to. And what she did next, she decided to do differently.

As a competitive weight lifter, Heywood was still driven, fiercely competitive and hard working. She still loved to win. But she didn’t hurt herself anymore. She ate full meals; let herself gain weight. Heywood began to love herself. Finally accepting defeat in a healthy way, Heywood describes placing second in a weight lifting competition years later, and how, for the first time in her life, coming in second didn’t ruin her day.

I don’t have to win in order to laugh, to talk to people, to take my place.
Suddenly I can breathe a little easier, and somewhere in those walls of

muscle that make my heart thick, something that's been clenched up really tight for years loosens and falls away. Some ghost within me feels her blood and takes shape. My voice is loud when I shout. In the thick of voices, sweat everywhere, the clang of weights and the smell of chalk, huge guys snorting ammonia and hitting themselves in the head before they run to the bench, throw themselves down, and pop up 600 pounds from their chests, I feel like I belong there, part of the maddening crowd. I win no trophy that day. I win some long-dead part of myself instead.

(Heywood, 201)

Heywood found the place George Sheehan always lived. She only escaped the darkness because she stopped trying to please everyone else; she no longer tried to prove herself to anyone. Heywood didn't look to a man or a crowd of people after her event; she didn't need to. She had confidence, self-respect, friendship, camaraderie. She had life again—a prize far more valuable than any medal or trophy.

I should have been like George Sheehan. I live in the 21st century in a time when women are steadily and continuously making great strides (pun intended) and catching up to men (pun intended again). But like Heywood, for the longest time, I just couldn't be. Even when I tried to convince myself running was something to do “just for fun,” I knew it never had been that for me. For me, too, it was always about so much more.

My Reasons

“It’s good to know that others have lived your craziness” (Heywood, 192).

My coach never raped me.

I grew up surrounded by family and friends who were probably *overly* supportive. My entire upbringing, people constantly told me I was great.

Nonetheless, I’ve been to the place Heywood was when she hit rock bottom. I’ve felt and ignored the spearing pain like knives in my knees after running miles upon miles before or after scheduled practices, just because I needed to cut those couple seconds. I’ve looked at and hated the girl grabbing her face or inner thighs in the mirror making sure there was no accumulation of fat after eating half a cookie. I’ve been in that dark place.

I know what it feels like to feel crazy.

I’ve also been in that less dark, but far more maddening place. The one where all you want to do is shove it up everyone’s ass who said you couldn’t, or can’t or just probably won’t *because you’re a girl*.

It wasn’t my parents’ fault. They just wanted me to be “realistic;” to stop wasting time crying after school in 3rd grade *because it was unfair those boys could beat me every time when I was the one who practiced outside in my backyard every day*.

“They’re boys, Jules. That’s just the way it goes.”

I couldn't deal. That wasn't going to be the way it went. Not for this girl.

When You Beat the Boy

Gym class was always my favorite. It wasn't that I was the best at all the games Ms. Kunkler made us play. I was never particularly strong. I couldn't always throw the dodge ball farthest or hardest, or aggressively box anyone out playing half-court basketball. But it didn't matter. Because every gym class ended the same way—with a race. And that part came easily to me; that part, I absolutely *loved*.

I remember getting butterflies when I sensed class was almost over. Ms. Kunkler would slowly make her way to the middle of the gym floor, blow the whistle, and call for the girls to line up on the thick black baseline. This was never the part I worried about. Everyone knew I would win. I never lost a gym class girls race in grade school. Not once. It was basically the class joke—who would get 2nd and 3rd today?

Then it was the boys' turn. The top three boys and girls would then compete all together in a final race.

This part made my stomach sink.

By 8th grade, many of the boys started hitting puberty—they were getting faster, stronger, bulkier, and all 72 pre-pubescent pounds of me stayed exactly the same. Usually I could beat out one or two of them, but I never won. Every Tuesday after the final race, Ms. Kunkler would give me a high-five—“closer this week, Jule.” (I started to think she was just saying it to make me feel better). There was no way I would ever beat Devon Mitchell. He was 5 foot 10 and a solid 180 pounds in 8th grade. Impossible.

The school custodian, Joe, always cleaned the gym during 6th period. I can still picture Joe posted up in the corner of the gymnasium on that Tuesday afternoon, his mop in one hand, his broad hip leaning against the water fountain, beer belly sticking out, watching the six of us line up on the baseline: Luke, Devon, Corey, Mary, Alexis and me.

Ms. Kunkler blew the whistle, and we were off. Down and back, to the other thick black baseline. I slapped my hand down at the opposite side of the gym and remember using every single ounce of energy to make it back to Ms. Kunkler. We were neck and neck. Me, and 180 pound, *jackedashell* Devon Mitchell. I don't really know what came over my chicken legs in those last 10 feet, it just happened. I beat Devon. My first memorable victory, and quite possibly, the sweetest ever.

As I jogged over to the locker room with the others, Devon came up behind me taunting: “you cheated, your skinny ass didn’t beat me. You white girls can’t run for shit...Ms. Kunkler just loves your skinny ass.”

Skinny ass?! Got me, Devon.

But he did get me.

I opened my eyes as wide as I could, feeling the tears hovering, praying one wouldn’t slip down my cheek before I escaped through the locker room doors. I kept moving, *just get to the locker room*, I thought. Right before I pushed through the swinging door, Devon still on my tail, saying *God knows what* about my “skinny, cheating ass,” Joe sauntered over from the water fountain.

“Hey you,” he pointed to Devon. “Quit, it. *The girl* won.”

I watched Devon’s jaw drop, and grinning, turned back to Joe who flashed me a quick congratulatory wink, smirked and trudged out of the gym with his mop. I jogged

into the locker room and was greeted by 27 giggling, cheering, flat chested 8th grade girls giving me high-fives.

Screw you Devon Mitchell, I thought. “*This girl won.*”

I carried that gym class victory with me for a long time. Running became about beating the boy; about shoving it up Devon Mitchell’s ass. Then I won the grade school Diocesan championship race, and it became about beating every girl I had ever raced.

At age 13, I was the best runner in the greater Pittsburgh area, and I was cocky as hell.

Cocky As Hell

I started to love running because I got lots of fake shiny trophies and medals onto which Mom would anally Sharpie the year, my grade and my times. Once in middle school I ran a mile and a half in 9 minutes and 31 seconds. (I’d never know that if not for Mom’s diligent Sharpie-ing). But I didn’t care what my times were. All I knew was that when I won, I was rewarded with a medal and I got my name on the announcements the next day at school. That was reason enough to sprint for 10 minutes any day for me.

Mom used to call me “Peter Pan.” “My little girl who refuses to grow up,” she’d joke. I never thought anything of it; didn’t really get what she meant. I couldn’t possibly foresee how much my world would change when my body finally started to match my age.

Then it did.

My body transformed my sophomore year of high school. I entered 9th grade weighing in at 76 pounds. I was 5 foot 3 inches. The next year, I grew 5 inches and gained almost half my body weight. It was a frightening and horrifying and terribly painful experience as the bones in my legs grew exponentially faster than my muscles did. Everything hurt. Including my pride.

The fiery pain of cramps; the all-consuming panic and confusion of labored breathing ensuing on even the slightest inclines; the discomfort and awkwardness I felt as I noticed the jiggle of my new (despised) breasts and inner thighs irritated me. I hated it all and finally understood Mom's nickname for me.

I wanted to go back to being Mom's Peter Pan. I desperately wished for my former life in Never Never Land where you never reach 100 pounds and you don't grow out of favorite *Limited Too* training bra from 5th grade.

My self-esteem plummeted that season. I was no longer winning races—no longer the best on my team, let alone placing in section meets. I was still in the fast pack, but at the back. I hated the back of the fast pack. I was convinced it had everything to do with my weight; my stupid new hips. My (*still too small to be worth it*) boobs.

As I struggled to lug my newly *massive* body up and down hills, running started to mean more. *I ran to shed those pounds.*

It's an awkward thing to explain to people. Should I have been actively trying to lose weight as a 106-pound teenage girl? Probably not. But I had just gained 30 pounds in a little over a year.

Newsflash: you feel it when you gain 30 pounds. And it feels weird.

The Gap

“But I can’t take time off. I just can’t...I know that my thighs touch each other when I stand up. How did this happen? It’s the worst in the car. They spread out. They’re so big. I pinch them, and something gives. Fat. Dough. There it is” (Heywood, 157).

There was a gap in between my thighs; *and I was obsessed with it.*

Every day when I got out of the shower, the first thing I always compulsively did was run to the steamy mirror and stand; naked—only a towel wrapped around my hair. My body dripping wet, I forced my feet together in anxious anticipation and used my hand to hurriedly wipe a small circle on the bottom of the fogged up glass. I didn't need much space; I only needed to see a tiny fraction of my body; only wanted to see *that* part. I intently stared at that gap between my upper thighs.

And with that, my day was decided for me.

That space told me what my breakfast would be; whether I'd get fat-free Italian dressing or (what I actually preferred), buttermilk ranch on my salad at noon. On most days, when I was going to practice and doing my additional daily runs, that space between my upper thighs was a generous two or three centimeters wide. Those were the good days; the days I rewarded myself with a *whole* granola bar or even a bowl of cereal at breakfast. The days I allowed myself to douse that despised lettuce with Ranch and

shake with delight as I guzzled down coffee with *regular* 2% milk and an extra packet of sugar.

Those were also the days that motivated me to run; forced me to; made it utterly impossible for me to skip. I knew those mornings would turn into nights, and the time would soon come for me to shower once again. After my shower, I'd want—*need* to see that exact same gap.

Weekends were always the worst for the gap; days after I drank a little too much or (worse yet) after I drunkenly ate fries, pizza or cheese balls on my walk home. Shrunken down to a mere centimeter, sometimes even millimeters, the gap suffered on those Saturday and Sunday mornings, and so did I.

The smaller the space, the tighter I squeezed my feet together, as if part of me almost *wanted* to feel the shocking, horrifying disappointment of a normal female body structure—of the tiny pudge of extra cellulite on my otherwise obnoxiously twiggy legs actually touching. But my thighs never met—never.

My 10-second ritual in front of my bathroom mirror each morning controlled my entire day, and I hated it, but knew it. The number of centimeters I saw directly and unquestionably dictated how I felt as I walked and whether or not I focused on the *eversoslight* jiggle I knew was always there (but only sometimes noticed) on my way to class. That space—that gap, meant more to me than it should have. And I knew (and hated) that too.

When people used to ask me why I ran so much, I never told them it was because I liked to look and feel super skinny. I was 5'8 and 100, 105, 110 pounds—that would

just piss too many people off. And it wouldn't even have been entirely true. The truth is, I *did* love the feeling of wind on my back and the way my heart would beat out of my chest—how it made me feel alive and rejuvenated and *calm*. The truth too however, was that I needed my runs for so much more.

Sometimes I tried to force myself not to rush to the mirror as soon as I turned the water off.

Sometimes I spent my entire 15-minute shower thinking about the ridiculousness of the entire ritual all together.

But for the longest time, I never successfully escaped the bathroom without checking, *justrealquick*.

Every time it happened, part of me acknowledged my running obsession was about so much more than what I would ever admit aloud. That what I claimed to love about running only partly explained why I did it; why I do it so much and so well. Another part, (a bigger part) was about the gap. About how empowering that admittedly freakish, abnormal space between my legs was; about the satisfaction I got from the daily reinforcement that I was (just a little bit) *too* thin.

Practice Uniforms

The year after I left Oakland Catholic High School, my 75-year-old coach, George, designed and implemented a strict practice uniform: a baggy gray t-shirt with OC Eagles stitched on the upper right chest and disgustingly (almost below knee-length), shiny maroon shorts. He'd never blame me directly, but I know it was all my fault.

It happened every single Wednesday and Friday of outdoor track season—even if it was too cold; even when it was raining. By the time George met the team at the public track for practice (he drove the school van, we jogged the mile from school), I had already stripped down to my sports bra and youth medium Nike running shorts. “I want to get tan for prom, George,” I’d lie.

That was not at all why I anxiously tore off my already tiny, skin-tight running tank top. I knew my boyfriends were up there practicing too. My real boyfriend, Brandon; and all the other boys I knew were looking.

I loved my body again that spring. The slight indentation of my abdomen muscles contracting and relaxing as my delicate, tiny toned arms vigorously pumped. I loved looking down and seeing my quads form that perfectly raised line around my kneecap.

I loved myself in those moments; on those days.

Because I knew they were talking about me; because they lusted after me. It wasn’t healthy, but it made me happy. And it sure as hell made me go faster. Which made me happy too.

Fainting

I love George like a grandpa; I can’t say a mean thing about him. But one day, without realizing it, George made me faint.

He was never overly transparent about who he thought was the most talented runner on the team. Before hard practices or big meets, George would always pull aside his top runner for a few last words of wisdom, strategy for the biggest hill or hints about the other teams’ toughest competitors. He’d go over what ideal times to hit at each half-

mile mark and where he'd be standing to give the splits. George always liked me, (and I think, probably worried about me) so even when I wasn't placing first on the team, I usually got my own private pep talk. But for some reason at that hell day practice, he didn't pull me aside. He only talked to Melissa; the new freshman.

We started doing our thousand meter repeats, not at "just under race pace" like we normally did, we were *sprinting*. It was after I gained the weight. I didn't eat all day before practice; I knew the boys would be up there. Half way around our fifth and final rep, I was one step behind Melissa. Glancing down at my watch, we were on pace to smash our previous four times. *I'm beating her I thought. George thinks I can't. Dave's here; Brandon's here; CJ's here. I'm fucking beating her.*

As we rounded the last curve, I felt my stride widen and pumped my emaciated arms, sweat pouring down my face. My body heating up with hunger, anger and exhaustion.

Then everything went black.

The next thing I remember I woke up in the school van, George hovering over me, a freezing cold towel on my head. "*Jesus, Jule, whaddaya trying to do, kill yourself?*" I didn't answer, just closed my eyes. *What the hell was I doing?* I was starving. I needed to eat. I couldn't. I went home, grabbed an apple and closed my door. I knew George would call, and I did not want to explain this one to Mom.

Back of the Pack

If I hadn't found myself in the "back of the fast pack" I probably never would have talked to Rachel. Before I gained the weight, I always did hell days by myself. No one could keep up with my miniscule body as it flew around the dirt track and up hills, and George didn't want me holding back for the sake of anyone else. *As if.*

Sophomore year, the "Julia group" ceased to exist and my "hell day" workouts began looking like everyone else's. Straining to stay in the immediate dust of those new hipless freshmen (all of whom I despised for being the *new and improved* models of me). I saw workouts from a new perspective; from Rachel's perspective.

Rachel's the most admirable kind of runner. The kind who isn't really innately built for the sport and, to put it bluntly, has little to no raw talent. Rachel is my height, but has a butt—a big one. And thighs—big ones. And an asthma problem—an even bigger one. But what's not big about Rachel is her ego. She's never been one who competes for the biggest trophy or dreams of hearing her name over the PA system at school, or spastically grabs the paper from her dad's hand the morning after a track meet to check for her name and time.

That was me.

For the longest time I mistook Rachel's uncompetitive, passive approach to running as laziness or lack of caring. I always assumed *my* way of doing things on the track or during hill workouts was the best way—get up the hill or around the curve first; then do it again, and win again. If you carry 25 extra pounds in your butt and have chronic asthma, that approach becomes impossible and ridiculous on hell days in 80-degree heat. So Rachel took a different approach. She ran with thoughtfulness and control. She ran because it made her body feel good afterwards. She enjoyed the challenge of picking one of her teammates and matching their pace as a personal goal. Rachel ran because she loved the smell of Fall in the trails.

She ran like George Sheehan.

Rachel didn't weigh herself after every practice or stand in front of her bathroom mirror and look at the space between her thighs, wondering what food to eliminate at dinner to make that gap grow. She's the kind of runner I needed to become when my innate talent was absorbed partially by body fat, but more so by fear and self-doubt. I needed a new reason to run; I needed help.

She tried reasoning with me, tried planning team trips to the local frozen yogurt shop after practice, tried incessantly complimenting me on my bulging collarbone (later, Rachel told me she hoped it would ease my weight obsession if I knew my favorite bone was popping out of my body *just how I liked it*). In retrospect, I feel badly when I think about the countless fruitless efforts Rachel made with me all those years. She just wanted me to love it like she did—to relax—to have fun. But she didn't ever help me the way she wanted to; she couldn't.

For four years, I stayed the same. My weight fluctuated between 100 and 107 pounds. I never beat Melissa. After freshman year, I never made it to States.

When I got to college, I joined the club team; I figured I would be the best. I was—I liked it.

I hated college my freshman year. It's really hard to “click” with people when you spend approximately 45 seconds a day in the dining hall to avoid grabbing a cookie or a piece of bread.

But one day, during my quick visit to the buffet in East Halls, I met Ray.

No More Wars

“For now, I can laugh at myself just a little about how tiny my wars are, that no one else even knows they’re being fought or whether or how they’re won” (Heywood, 193).

We were friends. *Truly*. Just friends. It was never the kind of co-ed friendship that everyone knows isn’t really *just* a friendship. It wasn’t clouded by sexual tension and sexual feelings or just plain sex. “Nooooo but we’re seriously just BEST friends.” No no no. This was not that. This was different. It was real.

Or so I thought.

Ray was my “buddy”. We hung out after class and watched TV and answered each other’s late night calls on walks home. He even set me up on a Valentine’s Day date with his best guy friend. I never felt the desire to impress Ray. I was too focused on all the other guys. The ones who grabbed at my skinny waist when I went out and told me they loved my long, sexy legs. Ray never told me those things because he didn’t love my long legs; he thought they were gross.

They were gross.

Ray knew about my little wars. He was the only one who made me admit to myself what running had actually become to me. Ray wasn’t afraid of me. He made me change.

I've never told him that. I've never really admitted that to myself before. But I am now. He made me love myself for the first time.

Now, finally, running can come back into my life. And this time, it can be good for me. This time, things are different.

Ray knows I hate the word cinnamon and that I think jumbo shrimp is stupid. He watches me shove my checkered blue and green pillow in between my wall and my bed before I go to sleep every night and for months, has never once asked me why I do it. He doesn't care that when I get up to leave a classroom or a table or a restaurant I have to turn around and look back (at least once) to make sure I didn't forget anything. He knows for the longest time the reason I pushed my stomach in with my hands after every meal was because I didn't like the feeling of being full and wanted to make the food move down my digestive tract faster, even though I knew that's not at all how it works. He never mocked me for this or any of my other bizarre habits; he just nonchalantly grabbed my hand when I would bring it to my stomach, slide it away from my abdomen into his palm. He accepts me for who I am. He doesn't call me crazy. In quiet, small, ways, he helps me every day.

Only Ray can get me to lie still for more than five minutes and not want to jump up and do something—run somewhere. He makes me feel calm. Free of pain or sadness and most importantly, self doubt.

Ray's the first person I've ever loved. And the second thing that's saved me from myself.

Ray and I finally signed up to run a 5K together last Fall. He made me promise we would strictly stick to a talking pace and run together *and just enjoy it*. My stomach sank as I imagined not being called up on stage after to get some poorly crafted trophy for placing in my age category. But I agreed anyway.

The whole race, Ray talked. He got me look and laugh at funny spectators along the way. He got me to smile. *Why was I so uptight about running? What was the point anymore?* As we crossed the finish line, legs in sync, I felt Ray's short fingers grabbing hold of mine. I think this was the first time he was actually proud of me as a runner. It was the slowest 5K I've ever run.

I'm 22 years old. I want to go to grad school and live in New York and Boston and California before I settle down. I don't know if I'll end up with Ray. But regardless of what happens, I'll forever remember the way I felt that day he took my hand at the finish line. It was the day I fell out of love with winning. Something finally clicked. Like Heywood, I found part of myself that day; won something back I had lost, or perhaps never had at all. That day running—*life* became about more than first place or having the smallest body circumference of anyone I knew.

For the first time, I wasn't gasping for air as I crossed; I wasn't trying to beat anyone out in the last seconds or mentally calculating the calories burned in that 24-minute jog. I was running—*just running*.

Things got progressively better for me after that. I started running more races, just because. I ate more and more. I ate a bagel. I actually love bagels. I don't push my stomach in every time I eat something that isn't green and leafy.

I've become a real person—just a regular, exercising, healthy person.

When I run now, it's just different. Everything's different.

I don't grab at my face anymore in the mirror and I successfully make it out of the bathroom without looking at the space between my upper thighs.

I don't think I'll ever go back to how I was. I can't imagine ever standing in the mirror with my feet pressed together, a stern, panicked gaze glued between my legs. It's just not me anymore. I don't ever think about being 100 pounds. I eat dessert almost every time it's offered and I love chips and queso more than most foods on this Earth. Totally *not* green food.

I can't credit my better life all to one thing or person. Ray did serve as the catalyst for my change, but he's not the reason I'm still okay. Like Heywood, I just needed a shove. Once I got there, running could take over—I could take over. Now that I'm here, I've discovered that better place; the one George Sheehan writes about. The one Heywood finally found. The one described in those words on my mirror.

Those quotes still hang there. I look at them now and don't hate them; no longer resent what they tell me. Running serves as my temporary release from anxiety or anger—things that at times, still do consume me. But I don't run compulsively anymore. I run with Rachel and no longer need to be “one step ahead” the entire time. Running has

evolved into something so natural—so unforced. Whether I use it as a way to clear my head or a social hour with my best friend, it's stress-free; calming; peaceful.

I am much more thoughtful about how I run and why. I allow myself to escape into a place that before, I had only ever read about; a place I once resented. This place is not dark. It's beautiful—it's perfect.

I finally get those quotes. *I can feel it now*. Running makes me (even if only temporarily) *chill*.

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ACADEMIC VITA

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Education:

The Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA
Schreyer Honors College
Bachelor of Arts in English

Graduation: May 2013

Study Abroad Experience:

Literary London study abroad program: English

London, England May-June 2011

Awards/Honors:

- Dean's List: Fall 2009, Spring 2010, Fall 2010, Spring 2011, Fall 2011, Spring 2012, Fall 2012
- Member of Phi Beta Kappa Honors Fraternity
- Member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars (NSCS)
- Penn State Club Cross Country Freshman of the Year: 2009

Leadership:

Penn State Panhellenic Dance Marathon

University Park, PA 2009-2012

Committee member, Lieutenant Captain

- Helped raise money to support the Four Diamonds Fund, which raises money for pediatric cancer research and treatment. Contributed to the \$9.5 million raised in 2010 and \$10.7 million raised in 2011
- Worked in small team to keep the THON dance floor and surrounding areas clean to ensure the safety of dancers and guests
- Worked in a team of 36 elected committee members from each of the 18 committees to assist captains during the weekend

Big Brother Big Sister Program

State College, PA August 2011-May 2012

Student Volunteer

- Planned and participated in activities with child from low-income, single-parent family 1-2 hours/week

Work Experience:

Penn State Fitness

University Park, PA December 2011-present

Group Fitness Instructor

- Completed 32-week training program to develop confidence, leadership and skills necessary to instruct classes of up to 100 fitness patrons
- Teach 3-4 group aerobic/yoga fitness classes per week to Penn State students, faculty and staff
- Monitor fitness room doors, check people into fitness classes

Morgan Center

University Park, PA May-August 2012

Peer Tutor

- Met twice a week for tutoring sessions in a variety of academic subject with Penn State student athletes

The Daily Collegian

University Park, PA September 2009-December 2011

Reporter

- Researched, interviewed, wrote and revised 1-2 articles per week for the daily newspaper
- Attended weekly budget meetings to pitch story ideas for upcoming weeks

Leech Tishman Fuscaldo & Lampl LLC

Pittsburgh, PA Summer 2010, 2011

Legal Intern

- Filed, organized material for administrative assistants and lawyers
- Assisted in doing background research for cases

Teacher's Assistant (TA)

University Park, PA January-May 2011

Grader

- Assisted students with homework questions and practice problems
- Graded and gave feedback on students' homework assignments