

mice. But there had to be transferable skills, right? Basic Tarahumara principles that could survive and take root in American soil?

Because my God, imagine the payoff. What if you could run for decades and never get injured . . . and log hundreds of weekly miles and enjoy every one of them . . . and see your heart rate drop and your stress and anger fade while your energy soared? Imagine crime, cholesterol, and greed melting away as a nation of Running People finally rediscovered its stride. More than his Olympic runners, more than his triumphs and records, this could be Joe Vigil's legacy.

He didn't have all the answers yet—but watching the Tarahumara whisk past in their wizard capes, he knew where he would find them.

CHAPTER 16



FUNNY, because Shaggy was looking at the same thing and all he saw was a middle-aged guy with a demonic knee.

Shaggy's ear caught the problem first. For hours, he'd been listening to the faint *whish . . . whish . . . whish* of Juan's and Martimano's sandals, a sound like a drummer beating rhythm with the brushes. Their soles didn't hit the ground so much as caress it, scratching back lightly as each foot kicked toward their butts and circled around for the next stride. Hour after hour: *whish . . . whish . . . whish . . .*

But as they came down Mount Elbert on the single-track trail toward mile 70, Shaggy detected a little hitch in the beat. Martimano seemed to be babying one foot, placing it carefully rather than whipping it right around. Juan noticed, too; he kept glancing back at Martimano uncertainly.

“*¿Qué pasa?*” Shaggy asked. “What's up?”

Martimano didn't answer right away, most likely because he was mentally scanning the previous twelve hours to see if he could pinpoint the cause of his pain: was it running those thirteen miles wearing trail shoes for the first time in his life? Or pivoting around those jagged switchbacks in the dark? Or slip-sliding over slick stones in a raging river? Or was it . . .

“*La bruja,*” Martimano said; must've been the witch. The whole episode back at the firehouse suddenly made sense. Ann's glare, the mumbo jumbo she spat at him, the shocked look on people's faces,

Kitty's refusal to repeat it in Spanish, Shaggy's comment—it was obvious. Ann had cursed him. "I passed her," Martimano said later, "but then she cast a spell on my knee."

Martimano had been afraid something like this would happen ever since the Pescador had refused to bring along their shaman. Back home in the Barrancas, the shamans protect the *iskiate* and *pinole* from witchcraft, and combat any spells in the runner's hips and knees and butts by massaging them with smooth stones and mashed medicinal herbs. But the Tarahumara had no shaman by their side in Leadville, and look what happened: for the first time in forty-two years, Martimano's knee was giving out.

When Shaggy realized what was going on, he felt a sudden pang of affection. *They're not gods*, he realized. *They're just guys*. And like every guy, the thing they loved most could bring them the most misery and confusion. Running a hundred miles wasn't painless for the Tarahumara, either; they had to face their doubts, and silence the little devil on their shoulder who kept whispering excellent reasons in their ear for quitting.

Shaggy looked over at Juan, who was torn between taking off or sticking with his mentor. "Go ahead," Shaggy told Juan and his pacer. "I've got your boy. Go run that *bruja* down like a deer!"

Juan nodded, and soon disappeared around a bend in the trail.

Shaggy gave Martimano a wink. "It's *tú y yo, amigo*."

"*Guadajuko*," Martimano said. Cool by me.

The scent of the finish line was tickling Ann's nose. By the time Juan made it to the Halfmoon aid station at mile 72, Ann had nearly doubled her lead; she was twenty-two minutes ahead with just twenty-eight miles to go.

Just to pull even, Juan would have to steal back close to one minute every mile, and he was about to enter the worst possible place to start trying: a seven-mile stretch of asphalt. Ann, with her road-racing expertise and air-injected Nikes, could uncoil her long legs and let fly. Juan, who'd never touched blacktop until that day, would have to handle the strange surface in homemade sandals.

"His feet are really going to suffer," Juan's pacer called out to a TV crew by the roadside. As soon as Juan came off the dirt and hit the hardtop, he bent his knees and shortened his stride, getting all

the shock absorption he needed from the up-and-down compression of his legs. He adjusted so well, in fact, that his amazed pacer began falling back, unable to keep up.

Juan chased Ann on his own. He covered the seven miles to the Fish Hatchery in almost exactly the time it had taken him that morning, then cut left and onto the muddy trail leading to the dreaded Powerline Climb. Many Leadville runners fear Powerline nearly as much as Hope Pass. "I've seen people sitting by the side of the trail, crying," one Leadville vet recalled. But Juan leaned into it like he'd been waiting for it all day, running up near-vertical pitches that force most runners to push their knees down with their hands.

Ahead, Ann was approaching the peak, but her eyes were nearly closed with exhaustion, as if she couldn't bear to even look at the last bit of slope. Switchback by switchback, Juan steadily reeled her in—until abruptly, he pulled up short and started hopping on one foot. Disaster had struck; the thong on one of his sandals had snapped, and he had nothing to replace it with. As Ann was cresting the mountain, Juan was taking a seat on a rock and examining what was left of the strap. He rethreaded the sandal, and found there was just enough thong left to hold the sole on his foot. He knotted the shortened strap carefully and gave it a couple of test steps. Good to go.

Ann, meanwhile, had made it to the homestretch. All she had left was the ten miles of rolling dirt trail around Turquoise Lake before the screams of the Sixth Street party animals hauled her uphill to the finish line. It was just past eight in the evening and the woods around her were sinking into darkness—and that's when something burst out of the trees behind her. It came on her so fast, Ann couldn't even react; she froze in place in the middle of the trail, too startled to move, as Juan darted to her left with one stride and back onto the trail with the next, his white cape swirling around him as he whisked past Ann and disappeared down the trail.

He didn't even look tired! It's like he was just . . . having fun! Ann was so crushed, she decided to quit. She was less than an hour from the finish line, but the Tarahumara joyfulness that so excited Joe Vigil had totally disheartened her. Here she was, absolutely *killing* herself to hold the lead, and this guy looked like he could have snatched it any time he pleased. It was humiliating; she now realized that as soon as she'd sprung her Queen's Gambit, Juan had marked her for the

kill. Her husband eventually got her moving again, and just in time; Martimano and the rest of the Tarahumara pack were coming up fast. Juan crossed the finish line in 17:30, setting a new Leadville course record by twenty-five minutes. (He also established another first by shyly ducking under the tape instead of breasting it, never having seen one before.) Ann finished nearly a half hour later, in 18:06. Right behind her, Martimano and his bewitched knee finished third, with Manuel Luna and the rest of the Tarahumara charging home in fourth, fifth, seventh, tenth, and eleventh.

"Wow, what a race!" Scott Tinley raved for the TV audience as he pushed a microphone into Ann Trason's face. She blinked into the camera lights, looking like she was about to faint, but managed to rally one last burst of fight. "Sometimes," she said, "it takes a woman to bring out the best in a man."

Hey, and right back atcha, the Tarahumara could have replied; thanks to Ann's heroic attempt to single-handedly defeat an entire team of distance-running savants, she had smashed her own Leadville best by more than two hours, setting a new women's record that has never been broken.

But the Tarahumara weren't free to say anything at the moment, even if they'd been so inclined. They'd stepped off the racecourse and into a shit storm.

This should have been their moment. Finally, after centuries of horror and fear, after being hunted for their scalps, enslaved for their strength, and bullied for their land, the Tarahumara were respected. They had proven themselves, indisputably, the greatest ultrarunners on earth. The world would see they had fantastic skills worth studying, a way of life worth preserving, a homeland worth protecting.

Joe Vigil was already selling his house and quitting his job; that's how excited *he* was. Now that Leadville had built a bridge between American and Tarahumara culture, he was ready to carry out a plan he'd been contemplating for a long time. At sixty-five years old, he was ready to retire from Adams State anyway. He and his wife, Caroline, would move to Arizona's Mexican border, where he'd set up a base camp for Tarahumara studies. It might take another few years, but in the meantime, he'd come back to Leadville every summer and tighten his relationship with the Tarahumara racers. He'd start learn-

ing their language . . . get them on a treadmill with heart-rate and maximal-oxygen-consumption monitors . . . maybe even arrange workshops with his Olympians! Because that was the cool part—Ann had been right there with them, which meant whatever the Tarahumara were doing, the rest of us could learn!

It was beautiful. For about a minute.

If you think you're using one goddamn picture of my Tarahumara, Rick Fisher declared when Tony Post and the other Rockport executives hurried over with their congratulations, *you'd better come up with some money.*

Tony Post was appalled. "He really went off. He came across like he was totally enraged, like the kind of guy who'd hunt you down and kill you. Not literally," Post hastened to add. "He just seemed like this hothead who would argue forever and never admit he was wrong."

"He was a pain in the ass," Ken Chlouber added. "He wasn't a pain in the ass until we had big-time sponsors and TV crews, and then he held Rockport hostage to use film of the Indians. He tried to make life miserable for me as the race president, he was totally self-serving, and he didn't take care of them at all."

Fisher's response was to go sort of nuts, just the way he had that time when he was surrounded by drug thugs in the Copper Canyons and only survived by going berserk. "It was a fixed race!" Fisher claimed. "They had a blonde, blue-eyed female they wanted to win, and she didn't win." Fisher claimed all the journalists had been bought off with a secret three-day bacchanal funded by the Leadville race directors and held at a luxury resort in Aspen. One journalist even tried to bribe him, Fisher told me, offering Fisher money to get Juan to hold back and tie with Trason. "This journalist, a very reputable guy, said it's going to be a disaster if he wins, and the fact is, from the point of view of white runners, it was an absolute disaster that the Tarahumara won." Why? "Because of this sick American idea that women can compete with men." (Asked the journalist's name, Fisher refused to answer.)

Accusing Ken Chlouber and "the elite from the media establishment" of conspiring against the event's star attraction made no sense at all, but Fisher was just getting warmed up. He claimed that one of his runners had been slipped a drugged Coke that caused him to

“collapse and become deathly ill,” while another had been sexually molested by some “white person” who used the pretext of giving a post-workout rub-down to slip his hand under the Tarahumara’s breechcloth and “massage his penis and scrotum.” As for Rockport, Fisher claimed the company’s sponsorship was grudging at best and criminal at worst. “They promised to put a shoe factory in the Copper Canyons . . . the whole deal was a corrupt deal . . . when Rockport looked at the books, they found they’d been fleeced and the president of the company was fired . . .”

The Tarahumara watched the *chabochis* scream at each other. They heard the angry words, and saw the angry arms chopping in their direction. The Tarahumara didn’t know what was being said, but they got the message. Faced with anger and hostility, the world’s greatest underground athletes reacted as they always had; they headed back home to their canyons, fading like a dream and taking their secrets with them. After their triumph in 1994, the Tarahumara would never return to Leadville.

One man followed them. He was never seen in Leadville again either. It was the Tarahumara’s strange new friend, Shaggy—soon to be known as Caballo Blanco, lone wanderer of the High Sierras.

CHAPTER 17



And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?

Those people were some kind of solution.

—CONSTANTINE CAVAFY, “Waiting for the Barbarians”

“THAT WAS TEN years ago,” Caballo told me, wrapping up his tale. “And I’ve been here ever since.”

Mamá had kicked us out of her living-room restaurant hours before and gone to bed. Caballo, still talking, had led me down the deserted streets of Creel and into a back-alley bodega. We closed that place, too. By the time Caballo had brought me from 1994 to the present, it was two in the morning and my head was spinning. He’d told me more than I’d even hoped for about the Tarahumara’s flash across the American ultra landscape (and tipped me to how I could learn the rest by tracking down Rick Fisher, Joe Vigil, and company), but in all those tales, he’d never answered the only question I’d asked:

Dude, who *are* you?

It was as if he’d done nothing in his life before running through the woods with Martimano—or else he’d done plenty he wouldn’t talk about. Every time I probed, he sidestepped with either a joke or a non-answer that slammed the topic shut like a dungeon door (“How do I make money? I do stuff for rich people who won’t do it for themselves”). Then he’d power off on another yarn. The choice was clear; I could be a pest and piss him off, or I could back off and hear some great stories.

I did learn that after the ’94 Leadville race, Rick Fisher went on

the rampage. There were other races out there and other Tarahumara runners, and it wasn't long before Fisher had regrouped and was careening from mayhem to mayhem like a frat boy on a road trip. First, Team Tarahumara was thrown out of the Angeles Crest 100-Mile Endurance Run in California because Fisher kept barging into a runners-only section of the course in the middle of the race. "The last thing I want to do is disqualify a runner," the race director said, "but Rick left us no choice."

Then, three Tarahumara runners were disqualified after finishing first, second, and fourth in Utah's Wasatch Front 100 because Fisher had refused to pay the entry fee. Then it was on to Western States, where Fisher threw another finish-line tantrum, accusing race volunteers of secretly switching trail markers to trick the Tarahumara and—true story—*stealing their blood*. (All the Western States racers were asked for a blood sample as part of a scientific study on endurance, but Fisher alone somehow smelled a ruse and blew up. "The Tarahumara blood is very, very rare," he's reported to have said. "The medical world wants to get its hands on it for genetic testing.")

By that point, even the Tarahumara seemed to be sick of dealing with the Pescador. They also noticed that he kept trading up for newer and nicer SUVs, while all they got for the long, lonely weeks away from home and their hundreds of miles of mountain running were a few bags of corn. Once again, dealing with the *chabochis* had left the Tarahumara feeling like slaves. That was the end of Team Tarahumara. They disbanded—forever.

Micah True (or whatever his name really was) felt such kinship with the Tarahumara and such disgust with the behavior of his fellow Americans that he felt compelled to make amends. Immediately after he'd paced Martimano in the '94 Leadville race, he talked his way onto a radio station in Boulder, Colorado, and asked anyone with an old coat to come drop it off. Once he had a pile, he bundled them up and set off for the Copper Canyons.

He had no clue where he was going, putting his odds of actually finding his buddy Martimano on a par with Shackleton making it back from Antarctica. He wandered across the desert and through the canyons, repeating Martimano's name to anyone he met, until he stunned both himself and Martimano by actually arriving at the top of a nine-thousand-foot mountain and the center of Martimano's vil-

lage. The Tarahumara made him welcome in their own wordless way: they barely spoke to him, but when Caballo awoke every morning, he found a little pile of handmade tortillas and fresh *pinoles* by his campsite.

"The Rarámuri have no money, but nobody is poor," Caballo said. "In the States, you ask for a glass of water and they take you to a homeless shelter. Here, they take you in and feed you. You ask to camp out, and they say, 'Sure, but wouldn't you rather sleep inside with us?'"

But Choguita gets cold at night, too cold for a skinny guy from California (or wherever he was really from), so after giving away all his coats, Micah waved *adiós* to Juan and Martimano and struck off on his own, pushing into the warm depths of the canyons. He maneuvered blindly past drug dens and desperadoes, avoided diseases and canyon fever, and eventually discovered a spot he liked by a bend in the river. He hauled up rocks to build a hut, and made himself at home.

"I decided I was going to find the best place in the world to run, and that was it," he told me as we walked back to the hotel that night. "The first view made my jaw drop. I got all excited because I couldn't wait to get out on the trail. I was so overwhelmed, I didn't know where to begin. But it's wild out there. I had to give it some time."

He had no choice, anyway. The reason he was pacing at Leadville instead of racing was because his legs had begun betraying him after he turned forty. "I used to have trouble with injuries, especially with my ankle tendons," Micah said. Over the years, he'd tried every remedy—wraps, massage, more expensive and supportive shoes—but nothing really helped. When he arrived in the Barrancas, he decided to chuck logic and trust that the Tarahumara knew what they were doing. He wasn't going to take the time to try figuring out their secrets; he'd just tackle it swimming-hole style, by leaping in and hoping for the best.

He got rid of his running shoes and began wearing nothing but sandals. He started eating *pinoles* for breakfast (after learning how to cook it like oatmeal with water and honey), and carrying it dry with him in a hip bag during his rambles through the canyons. He took some vicious falls and sometimes barely made it back to his hut on his own two feet, but he just gritted his teeth, soaked his wounds in the

icy river, and chalked it up as an investment. "Suffering is humbling. It pays to know how to get your butt kicked," Caballo said. "I learned pretty fast you'd better have respect for the Sierra Madre, 'cause she'll chew you up and crap you out."

By his third year, Caballo was tackling trails that were invisible to the non-Tarahumara eye. With butterflies in his stomach, he'd push himself over the lip of jagged descents that were longer, steeper, and more serpentine than any black-diamond ski run. He'd scramble-sprint downhill for miles, barely in control, relying on his canyon-honed reflexes but still awaiting the *pop* of a knee cartilage, the rip of a hamstring, the fiery burn of a torn Achilles tendon he knew was coming any second.

But it never came. He never got hurt. After a few years in the canyons, Caballo was stronger, healthier, and faster than he'd ever been in his life. "My whole approach to running has changed since I've been here," he told me. As a test, he tried running a trail through the mountains that takes three days on horseback; he did it in seven hours. He's not sure how it all came together, what proportions of sandals and *pinalé* and *korima*, but—

"Hey," I interrupted him. "Could you show me?"
"Show you what?"

"How to run like that."

Something about his smile made me instantly regret asking.
"Yeah, I'll take you for a run," he said. "Meet me here at sunup."

"Huh! Huh!"

I was trying to shout, but it kept turning into a pant. "*Hoye*," I finally got out, catching Caballo Blanco's ear just before he vanished around an uphill bend. We had set out in the hills behind Creel, on a rocky, pine-needed trail climbing through the woods. We'd been running for less than ten minutes and already I was dying for air. It's not that Caballo is so fast; it's just that he seems so *light*, as though he wills himself uphill by mind power instead of muscle.

He turned and trotted back down. "Okay, man, lesson one. Get right behind me." He started to jog, more slowly this time, and I tried to copy everything he did. My arms floated until my hands were rib-high; my stride chopped down to pitty-pat steps; my back straightened so much I could almost hear the vertebrae creaking.

"Don't fight the trail," Caballo called back over his shoulder. "Take what it gives you. If you have a choice between one step or two between rocks, take three." Caballo has spent so many years navigating the trails, he's even nicknamed the stones beneath his feet: some are *ayudantes*, the helpers which let you spring forward with power; others are "tricksters," which look like *ayudantes* but roll treacherously at takeoff; and some are *chingoncitos*, little bastards just dying to lay you out.

"Lesson two," Caballo called. "Think *Easy, Light, Smooth*, and *Fast*. You start with easy, because if that's all you get, that's not so bad. Then work on light. Make it effortless, like you don't give a shit how high the hill is or how far you've got to go. When you've practiced that so long that you forget you're practicing, you work on making it *smooth*. You won't have to worry about the last one—you get those three, and you'll be fast."

I kept my eyes on Caballo's sandaled feet, trying to duplicate his odd, sort of tippy-toeing steps. I had my head down so long, I didn't notice at first that we'd left the forest.

"Wow!" I exclaimed.

The sun was just rising over the Sierras. Pine smoke scented the air, rising from dented stovepipes in the lodge-pole shacks on the edge of town. In the distance, giant standing stones like Easter Island statues reared from the mesa floor, with snow-dusted mountains in the background. Even if I hadn't been sucking wind, I'd have been breathless.

"I told ya," Micah gloated.

We'd hit our turnaround point, but even though I knew it would be foolish for me to try going more than eight miles, it was such a kick loping these trails that I hated heading back. Caballo knew exactly what I meant.

"I've felt that way for ten years," he said. "And I'm still just learning my way around." But he had to hustle; he was heading home to his hut that day, and he'd barely have enough time to make it before dark. And that's when he began to explain what he was doing in Creel in the first place.

"You know," Caballo began, "a lot has happened since that Leadville race." Ultrarunning used to be just a handful of freaks in

the woods with flashlights, but over the past few years, it had been transformed by an invasion of Young Guns. Like Karl Meltzer, who rocked “Strangelove” through his iPod while winning the Hardrock 100 three times in a row; and the “Dirt Diva,” Catra Corbett, a beautiful and kaleidoscopically-tattooed Goth chick who once, just for fun, ran all 211 miles of the John Muir trail across Yosemite National Park and then turned around and ran all the way back; and Tony “Naked Guy” Krupicka, who rarely wore more than skimpy shorts and spent a year sleeping in a friend’s closet while training to win the Leadville 100; and the Fabulous Flying Skaggs Brothers, Eric and Kyle, who hitchhiked to the Grand Canyon before setting a new record for the fastest round-trip run from rim to rim.

These Young Guns wanted something fresh, tough, and exotic, and they were flocking to trail-running in such numbers that, by 2002, it had become the fastest-growing outdoor sport in the country. It wasn’t just the racing they loved; it was the thrill of exploring the brave new world of their own bodies. Ultra god Scott Jurek summed up the Young Guns’ unofficial creed with a quote from William James he stuck on the end of every e-mail he sent: “Beyond the very extreme of fatigue and distress, we may find amounts of ease and power we never dreamed ourselves to own; sources of strength never taxed at all because we never push through the obstruction.”

As the Young Guns took to the woods, they brought everything that had been learned about sports science over the past decade. Matt Carpenter, a mountain runner in Colorado Springs, began spending hundreds of hours on a treadmill to measure the variations in body oscillations when, for instance, he took a sip of water (the most biomechanically efficient way to hold a water bottle was tucked into his armpit, not held in his hand). Carpenter used a belt sander and a straight razor to shave micro-ounces off his running shoes and plunged them in and out of the bathtub to gauge water retention and drying speed. In 2005, he used his obsessive knowledge to blast the record at Leadville—he finished in a stunning 15:42, nearly two hours faster than the fastest Tarahumara ever had.

But! What could the Tarahumara do if pushed? See, that’s what Caballo wanted to know. Victoriano and Juan had run like hunters,

the way they’d been taught: just fast enough to capture their quarry and no faster. Who knew how much faster they might have gone against a guy like Carpenter? And *no one* knew what they could do on their home terrain. As defending champs, didn’t they deserve the right to the home-field advantage at least once?

If the Tarahumara couldn’t go back to America, Caballo reasoned, then the Americans would have to come to the Tarahumara. But he knew the fiercely shy canyon-dwellers would vanish back into the hills if surrounded by a pack of question-firing, camera-clicking American runners.

However—and this was Caballo’s brainstorm—what if he set up a race the Tarahumara way? It would be like an old-time guitar picker’s battle—a week of sparring, trading secrets, studying each other’s style and techniques. On the last day, all the runners would face off in a 50-mile clash of champions.

It was a great idea—and a total joke, of course. No elite runner would take the risk; it wasn’t just career suicide, it was *suicide* suicide. Just to get to the starting line, they’d have to slip past bandits, hike through the badlands, keep an eagle eye on every sip of water and every bite of food. If they got hurt, they were dead; not right away, maybe, but inevitably. They could be days from the nearest road and hours from fresh water, with no chance for a rescue chopper to thread its way between those tight rock walls.

No matter. Caballo had already begun working on his plan. That’s the only reason he was in Creel. He’d left his hut at the bottom of the canyons and trekked into a town he loathed because he’d heard there was a PC with a dial-up connection in the back of a Creel candy shop. He’d learned some computer basics, gotten an e-mail account, and had begun sending messages to the outside world. And that’s where I came in; the only reason “the gringo Indio” had gotten interested when I ambushed him back at the hotel was because I told him I was a writer. Maybe an article about his race would actually attract some racers.

“So who are you inviting?” I asked.

“Just one guy so far,” he said. “I only want runners with the right spirit, real champions. So I’ve been messaging Scott Jurek.”

Scott Jurek? Seven-time Western States champ and three-peat

Ultrarunner of the Year Scott Jurek? Caballo had to be high out of his skull if he thought Scott Jurek was coming down here to race a bunch of nobodies in the middle of nowhere. Scott was the top ultrarunner in the country, maybe in the world, arguably of all time. When Scott Jurek wasn't racing, he was helping Brooks design their signature trail shoe, the Cascadia, or setting up sold-out running camps, or making decisions about what high-profile event he'd run next in Japan, Switzerland, Greece, or France. Scott Jurek was a business enterprise that lived and died by the health of Scott Jurek—which meant the last thing the company's chief asset needed to do was risk getting sick, shot, or defeated in some half-assed pickup race in a sniper-patrolled corner of the Mexican outback.

But somewhere, Caballo had read an interview with Jurek and felt an instant thrum of brotherhood. In his own way, Scott was nearly as mysterious as Caballo. While far lesser ultra stars like Dean Karnazes and Pam Reed were touting themselves on TV, writing self-glorifying memoirs, and (in Dean's case) promoting a sports drink by running bare-chested on a sky-cammed treadmill over Times Square, the greatest American ultrarunner of them all was virtually invisible. He seemed to be a pure racing animal, which explained two of his other peculiar habits: at the start of every race, he'd let out a bloodcurdling shriek, and after he won, he'd roll in the dirt like a hyperactive hound. Then he'd get up, brush himself off, and vanish back to Seattle until it was time for his war cry to echo through the dark again.

Now *that* was the kind of champion Caballo was looking for; not some showboat who'd use the Tarahumara to boost his own brand, but a true student of the sport who appreciated the artistry and effort in even the slowest runner's performance. Caballo didn't need any more proof of Scott Jurek's worthiness, but he got it anyway: asked at the end of the interview to list his idols, Jurek named the Tarahumara. "For inspiration," the article noted, "he repeats a saying of the Tarahumara Indians: 'When you run on the earth and run with the earth, you can run forever.'"

"See!" Caballo insisted. "He has a Rarámuri soul."

But hold on a sec. . . . "Even if Scott Jurek does agree to come, how about the Tarahumara?" I asked. "Will they go for it?"

"Maybe," Caballo shrugged. "The guy I want is Arnulfo Quimare."

This thing was never going to happen. I knew from personal experience that Arnulfo would barely even *talk* to an outsider, let alone hang with a whole gang of them for a week and guide them over the hidden trails of his homeland. I admired Caballo's taste and ambition, but I seriously questioned his grasp of reality. No American runners knew who he was, and most of the Tarahumara weren't sure *what* he was. Yet he was expecting them all to trust him? "I'm pretty sure Manuel Luna will come," Caballo continued. "Maybe with his son."

"Marcelino?" I asked.

"Yeah," Caballo said. "He's good." "He's awesome!"

I still had an after-image on my retina of the teenage Human Torch surging over that dirt trail as fast as a flame along a fuse. Well, in that case, who cared if Scott Jurek or any of the other hotshots showed up? Just the chance to run alongside Manuel and Marcelino and Caballo again would be worth it. The way Caballo and Marcelino ran, it was the closest a human could come to flying. I'd gotten just a taste of it out there on the trails of Creel, and I wanted more; it was like flapping your arms really hard and lifting a half inch off the ground—after that, how could you think of anything except trying again?

"I can do this," I told myself. Caballo had been in the same position I was in when he came down here; he was a guy in his forties with busted-up legs, and within a year, he was sky-walking across mountaintops. If it worked for him, why not me? If I really applied the techniques he'd taught me, could I get strong enough to run fifty miles through the Copper Canyons? The odds against his race coming off were roughly—actually, there were no odds. It wasn't going to happen. But if by some miracle he managed to set up a run with the top Tarahumara of their generation, I wanted to be there.

When we got back to Creel, Caballo and I shook hands.

"Thanks for the lessons," I said. "You taught me a lot."

"*Hasta luego, norawa,*" Caballo replied. Till the next time, buddy. And then he was off.

I watched him go. There was something terribly sad, yet terribly uplifting, about watching this prophet of the ancient art of distance running turn his back on everything except his dream, and heading back down to “the best place in the world to run.”

Alone.

CHAPTER 18



“YOU EVER HEARD of Caballo Blanco?”

After I got back from Mexico, I called Don Allison, the long-time editor of *UltraRunning* magazine. Caballo had let slip two details about his past worth following up: he’d been a pro fighter of some kind, and he’d won a few ultraraces. Fighting is insanely difficult to fact-check, what with its tangled ganglion of disciplines and accrediting bodies, but in ultrarunning, all roads lead to Don Allison in Weymouth, Massachusetts. As the clearinghouse for every rumor, race result, and rising star in the sport, Don Allison knew everyone and everything, and that’s what made the first syllable out of his mouth doubly disappointing:

“Who?”

“I think he also goes by Micah True,” I said. “But I’m not sure if that’s really his name or his dog’s.”

Silence.

“Hello?” I said.

“Yeah, hang on,” Allison finally responded. “I was just looking for something. So is he for real?”

“You mean, is he serious?”

“No, is he *real*? Does he really exist?”

“Yeah, he’s real. I found him down in Mexico.”

“Okay,” Allison said. “Then is he crazy?”

“No, he’s—” Now it was my turn to pause. “I don’t *think* so.”

"Because a guy by that name sent me a couple of articles. That's what I was looking for. I got to tell you, they were just unprintable."

Now that's saying something. *UltraRunning* is less like a magazine and more like those chatty family letters some people send instead of Christmas cards. Maybe 80 percent of every issue is made up of lists of names and times, the results of races no one ever heard of in places few but ultrarunners could ever find. Besides race reports, every issue has a few essays volunteered by runners opining on their latest obsessions, like "Using the Scale to Determine Your Optimum Hydration Needs" or "Headlamp and Flashlight Combinations." Needless to say, you've got to work hard to earn a rejection slip from *UltraRunning*, which made me afraid to even ask what Caballo, isolated in his hut like the Unabomber, had manifested about.

"Was he, like, threatening or something?"

"Nah," Allison said. "It just wasn't about running. It was more like a lecture on brotherhood and karma and greedy gringos."

"Did it mention this race he's planning?"

"Yeah, it talked about some race with the Tarahumara. But as far as I can see, he's the only one in it. Him, and about three Indians." Coach Joe Vigil had never heard of Caballo, either. I'd hoped that maybe they'd met on that epic day in Leadville, or later on down in the Barrancas. But right after the Leadville race, Coach Vigil's life had taken a sudden and dramatic turn. It started with a phone call: a young woman was on the line, asking if Coach Vigil could help her qualify for the Olympics. She'd been pretty talented in college, but she'd gotten so sick of running that she'd given it up and was thinking of opening a bakery café instead. Unless Coach Vigil thought she should keep trying . . .?

Vigil is a master motivator, so he knew just what to say: Forget it. Go make mochaccinos. Deena Kastor (then Drossin) sounded like a sweet kid, but she had no business even thinking about working with Vigil. She was a California beach girl who was used to running out her front door and along the Santa Monica trails under a warm Pacific sun. What Vigil had going was real Spartan warrior stuff—a survival-of-the-fittest program that combined a killer workload with the freezing, windswept Colorado mountains.

"I tried to discourage her because Alamosa is not a California town," Vigil would later say. "It's a little secluded, it's in the moun-

tais, and it gets cold—sometimes thirty degrees below zero. Only the toughest people survive there in terms of running." When Deena showed up anyway, Vigil was kind enough to reward her persistence by testing her basic fitness and training potential. The results did nothing to change Vigil's mind: she was mediocre.

But the more Coach Vigil pushed her away, the more intrigued Deena became. Posted on the wall of Vigil's office was a magic formula for fast running that, as far as Deena could tell, had absolutely nothing to do with running: it was stuff like "Practice abundance by giving back," and "Improve personal relationships," and "Show integrity to your value system." Vigil's dietary advice was just as bare of sports or science. His nutrition strategy for an Olympic marathon hopeful was this: "Eat as though you were a poor person."

Vigil was building his own mini Tarahumara world. Until he could wrap up his commitments and decamp to the Copper Canyons, he would do his best to re-create the Copper Canyons in Colorado. If Deena even wanted to think about training under Vigil, she had better be ready to train like the Tarahumara. That meant living lean and building her soul as much as her strength.

Deena got it, and couldn't wait to start. Coach Vigil believed you had to become a strong person before you could become a strong runner. So how could she lose? Grudgingly, Coach Vigil decided to give her a chance. In 1996, he began putting her through his Tarahumara-tinged training system. Within a year, the aspiring baker was on her way to becoming one of the greatest distance runners in American history.

She crushed the field to win the national cross-country championships, and went on to break the U.S. record in distances from three miles to the marathon. At the 2004 Athens Games, Deena outlasted the world-record holder, Paula Radcliffe, to win the bronze, the first Olympic medal for an American marathoner in twenty years. Ask Joe Vigil about Deena's accomplishments, though, and near the top of the list will always be the Humanitarian Athlete of the Year award she won in 2002.

Bit by bit, Coach Vigil was being drawn deeper into American distance running and further from his Copper Canyon plans. Before the 2004 Games, he was asked to establish a training camp for Olympic hopefuls high in the California mountains at Mammoth

Lakes. It was a ton of work for a seventy-five-year-old man, and Vigil paid for it: a year before the Olympics, he suffered a heart attack and needed a triple bypass. His last chance to learn from the Tarahumara, Vigil realized, was gone for good.

That left only one researcher in the world who was still pursuing the secret art of Tarahumara running: Caballo Blanco, whose findings were archived only in his muscle memory.

When my article came out in *Runner's World*, it sparked a good bit of interest in the Tarahumara, but something less than a stampede of elite trail-runners eager to sign up for Caballo's race. Something less than one, to be exact.

That may have been partly my fault; I found it impossible to describe him truthfully without using the word "cadaverous," or mentioning that the Tarahumara called him "kind of strange." No matter how psyched you might have been about the race, consequently, you'd have to think twice about putting your life in the hands of a mysterious loner with a fake name whose closest friends lived in caves and ate mice and still considered him the iffy one.

It was no help, either, that it was so hard to find out where and when the race might actually take place. Caballo had gotten his Web site up, but swapping messages with him was like waiting for a note in a bottle to drift up on the beach. To check e-mail, Caballo had to run

more than thirty miles over a mountain and wade through a river to the tiny town of Urique, where he'd cajoled a schoolteacher into letting him use the school's creaking PC and its single dial-up line. He could make the sixty-some-mile round trip only in good weather; otherwise he risked slipping to his death off a rain-slicked cliff or getting stranded between raging creeks. Phone service had just reached Urique in 2002, so maintenance was spotty at best; a trail-weary Caballo could arrive in Urique only to find the line had been down for days. Once, he missed checking messages because he'd been attacked by wild dogs and had to abort his trip to go in search of rabies shots.

Just seeing "Caballo Blanco" pop up in my in-box was always a huge relief. As nonchalant as he acted about the risks, Caballo was leading an extremely dangerous life. Every time he set out for a run,

it could be his last; he liked to believe the drug assassins wrote him off as a harmless "gringo Indio," but who knew how the drug assassins felt? Plus, there were his strange fainting spells: every once in a while, Caballo would suddenly pass out cold. Random blackouts are risky enough when you live in a place with 911, but out there in the lonely vastness of the Barrancas, an unconscious Caballo would never be spotted—or missed, for that matter. He once had a close call when he fainted shortly after running to a village. When he came to, he found a thick bandage on the back of his head and blood caked in his hair. If he'd gone down just half an hour earlier, he'd have been sprawled somewhere in the wilderness with a cracked skull.

Even if he survived the snipers and his own treacherous blood pressure, death was still lurking at his feet; all it would take was one misjudged *chingoncito* on one of those dental-floss Tarahumara trails, and the only thing left of Caballo would be the echo of his screams as he disappeared into the gorge.

Nothing stopped him. Running seemed to be the only sensual pleasure in his life, and as such, he savored it less like a workout and more like a gourmet meal. Even when his hut was nearly demolished by a landslide, Caballo snuck in a run before getting the roof back over his head.

But come spring, disaster struck. I got this email:

hey amigo, am in Urique after an eventful run and bobble down. I fucked my left ankle for the first time in many years! I'm not used to running with thick soles anymore. that's what I get for bragging, and wearing shoes while trying to save my light sandals for running faster and racing! Was 10 miles from Urique en La Sierra and knew that snap was not good, had to painfully crawl down into Urique because I had no choice but to get here, and my left foot looks like elephantitis!

Crap. I had a sick suspicion his accident was my fault. Just before we'd said good-bye in Creel, I noticed we had the same size feet, so I fished a pair of new Nike trail shoes out of my backpack and gave them to Caballo as a thank-you gift. He'd knotted the laces and slung them over his shoulder, figuring they might come in handy in a pinch if his sandals fell apart. He was too polite to point the finger in his

accident report, but I was pretty sure he was referring to my shoes when he mentioned he'd been wobbling around on thick soles when he crunched his ankle.

By this point, I was cringing with guilt. I was screwing Caballo in every direction. First, I'd accidentally set a time bomb by giving him those sneaks, and then I'd written an article that made his eccentricities a little too public for PR purposes. Caballo was killing himself to make this thing happen, and now, after months of effort, the only one who might show up was me: the lousy, half-lame runner bringing him the most grief.

Caballo had been able to blind himself to the truth in the pleasure of his rambling runs, but as he lay hurt and helpless in Urique, reality came crashing down. You can't live the way he did without looking like a freak, and now he was paying the price: no one would take him seriously. He wasn't even sure if he could persuade the Tarahumara to trust him, and they were just about the only people in the world who knew him anymore. So what was the point? Why was he chasing a dream everyone else thought was a joke?

If he hadn't busted his ankle, he'd have waited a long time for his answer. But as it was, he was still recovering in Urique when he received a message from God. The only god he'd been praying to, at least.

A FEW DAYS EARLIER, in the tiny Seattle apartment he shared

with his wife and a mountain of trophies, America's greatest ultrarunner was also confronting the limits of his own body.

That body still looked great; it was plenty fine enough to turn women's heads whenever Scott Jurek and his willowy blonde wife, Leah, were pedaling around their Capitol Hill neighborhood, hitting the bookstores and coffee shops and their favorite vegan Thai restaurants, a beautiful young hipster couple on the mountain bikes they owned instead of a car. Scott was tall and suppley muscled, with soulful brown eyes and a boy-band smile. He hadn't cut his hair since Leah gave him a buzz cut before his first Western States victory, leaving him six years later with a headful of Greek god curls that rippled when he ran.

How the gangly geek known as "Jerk" became an ultra star still baffles those who knew him growing up back in Proctor, Minnesota. "We harassed the crap out of him," said Dusty Olson, Proctor's star jock when he and Scott were teenagers. During cross-country runs,

Dusty and his buddies would pelt Scott with mud and take off. "He could never catch up," Dusty said. "No one could understand why he was so slow, because Jerker trained harder than anyone."

Not that Scott had much time for training. When he was in grade school, his mother contracted multiple sclerosis. It was up to Scott, as the oldest of three kids, to nurse his mother after school, clean the house, and haul logs for the woodstove while his father was at work. Years later, ultrarunning vets would sniff at Scott's starting-line screams and flying kung-fu leaps into aid stations. But when you've spent your childhood working like a deckhand and watching your mother sink into a nightmare of pain, maybe you never get over the joy of leaving everything behind and running for the hills.

After his mother had to be moved to a nursing home, Scott found himself alone with empty afternoons and a troubled heart. Luckily, just when Scott needed a friend, Dusty needed a sidekick. They were an odd couple, but oddly well-suited; Dusty was hungry for adventure, Scott for escape. Dusty's taste for competition was insatiable; soon after he won both the junior nationals for Nordic skiing *and* the regional cross-country championship, he convinced Scott to join him in the Minnesota Voyageur Trail Ultra 50-Mile Footrace. "Yeah, I conned him into it," Dusty said. Scott had never run half that distance but revered Dusty too much to say no.

In the middle of the race, Dusty's shoe came off in the mud. Before he could get it back on, Scott was gone. He tore through the woods to finish his first ultra in second place, beating Dusty by more than five minutes. "What the heck is going *on*?" Dusty wondered. That night, his phone rang relentlessly. "All the guys were making fun of me, going, 'You loser! You got dropped by the Jerker!'"

Scott was just as surprised. *So all that misery was leading somewhere after all*, he realized. All the hopelessness of nursing a mother who would never get better, all the frustration of chasing taunting jerks he could never catch—it had quietly bloomed into an ability to push harder and harder as things looked worse and worse. Coach Vigil would have been touched; Scott asked for nothing from his endurance, and got more than he could have hoped for.

Strictly by accident, Scott stumbled upon the most advanced weapon in the ultrarunner's arsenal: instead of cringing from fatigue, you embrace it. You refuse to let it go. You get to know it so well,

you're not afraid of it anymore. Lisa Smith-Batchen, the amazingly sunny and pixie-tailed ultrarunner from Idaho who trained through blizzards to win a six-day race in the Sahara, talks about exhaustion as if it's a playful pet. "I love the Beast," she says. "I actually look forward to the Beast showing up, because every time he does, I handle him better. I get him more under control." Once the Beast arrives, Lisa knows what she has to deal with and can get down to work. And isn't that the reason she's running through the desert in the first place—to put her training to work? To have a friendly little tussle with the Beast and show it who's boss? You can't hate the Beast and expect to beat it; the only way to truly conquer something, as every great philosopher and geneticist will tell you, is to love it.

Scott would never again linger in Dusty's shadow, or any other runner's. "Anybody who has seen him running fast on mountainous terrain in the last miles of a hundred-miler will be a changed person," an awestruck trail runner declared on Letsrun.com, the number one message board for all things running, after watching Scott shatter the record at Western States. Scott was a hero for a very different reason among back-of-the-packers too slow to see him in action. After winning a hundred-mile race, Scott would be desperate for a hot shower and cool sheets. But instead of leaving, he'd wrap himself in a sleeping bag and stand vigil by the finish line. When day broke the next morning, Scott would still be there, cheering hoarsely, letting that last, persistent runner know he wasn't alone.

By the time Scott turned thirty-one, he was virtually unbeatable. Every June another pack of gunslingers arrived at Western States aiming to take his title, and every year they found him wrapped in his sleeping bag by the time they had finished. "But so what?" Scott wondered. Now that he'd created this Ferrari of a body, what was he supposed to do? Keep racing the stopwatch and the gunslingers until they finally began to beat him? Running wasn't about winning. He'd known that ever since his lonely days as the Jerker, back when he was panting far behind Dusty with mud on his face. The true beauty of running was . . . was . . .

Well, Scott wasn't sure anymore. But by the time he'd sealed his seventh Western States victory in 2005, he knew where to start looking.

Two weeks after Western States, Scott came down from the mountains and made the long drive across the Mojave Desert to the starting line of the infamous Badwater Ultramarathon. When Ann Trason raced two ultras in one month, she at least stuck to planet Earth; Scott would be running his second on the surface of the sun.

Death Valley is the perfect flesh-grilling device, the Foreman Grill in Mother Nature's cupboard. It's a big, shimmering sea of salt ringed by mountains that bottle up the heat and force it right back down on your skull. The average air temperature hovers around 125 degrees, but once the sun rises and begins broiling the desert floor, the ground beneath Scott's feet would hit a nice, toasty 200 degrees—exactly the temperature you need to slow roast a prime rib. Plus, the air is so dry that by the time you feel thirsty, you could be as good as dead; sweat is sucked so quickly from your body, you can be dangerously dehydrated before it even registers in your throat. Try to conserve water, and you could be a dead man walking.

But every July, ninety runners from around the world spend up to sixty straight hours running down the sizzling black ribbon of Highway 190, making sure to stay on the white lines so the soles of their running shoes don't melt. At mile 17, they'll pass Furnace Creek, site of the hottest temperature ever recorded in the United States (134 degrees). From there, it only gets worse: they still have to climb three mountains and deal with hallucinations, rebellious stomachs, and at least one long night of running in the dark before they reach the finish. If they reach the finish: Lisa Smith-Batchen is the only American to ever win the six-day Marathon of the Sands across the Sahara, but even she had to be pulled from Badwater in 1999 and given an emergency IV to stop her dessicated kidneys from shutting down.

"This is the landscape of catastrophe," one Death Valley chronicler wrote. It's a bizarre and sort of Transylvanian experience to be running a race right through the heart of a killing field where lost hikers claw at their blackened tongues before dying of thirst, as Dr. Ben Jones can tell you firsthand. Dr. Jones was running Badwater in 1991 when he was hastily recruited to examine the body of a trekker discovered in the sands.

"I am the only one of which I am aware who has ever performed an autopsy during a race," he remarked. Not that he was any stranger to the morbid; "Badwater Ben" was also known for having his crew

haul a coffin full of ice water out on the highway to help him cool off. When slower runners caught up, they were jolted to find the most experienced athlete in the field lying by the side of the road in a casket, eyes closed and arms folded over his chest.

What was Scott thinking? He was raised on cross-country skis in Minnesota. What did he know about melting shoes and ice coffins? Even the Badwater race director, Chris Kostman, knew Scott was out of his element: "This race was thirty-five miles further than his longest previous race," Kostman would comment, "and twice as far as he'd ever run on pavement, not to mention significantly hotter than he'd ever experienced."

Kostman didn't know the half of it. Scott had been so focused that year on sharpening his trail skills for Western States, he hadn't run more than ten miles at a time on asphalt. As for heat acclimation . . . well, it didn't rain *every* day in Seattle, but it might as well have. Death Valley was in the midst of one of its hottest summers in history, with temperatures hovering at around 130 degrees. The coolest part of the coolest day was still way hotter than it got in Seattle all summer.

A runner's only hope of surviving Badwater was to have an experienced crew monitoring his vitals and supplying digestible calories and electrolyte drinks. One of Scott's top competitors that year had brought a nutritionist and four custom-equipped vans to leapfrog his progress down the course. Scott, on the other hand, had his wife, two Seattle buddies, and Dusty, assuming Dusty recovered from the hangover he still had when he rocked up just before the race began.

Scott's competition was going to be as fierce as the heat. He was up against Mike Sweeney, the two-time champion of the sweltering H.U.R.T. 100 in Hawaii, and Ferg Hawke, the supremely prepared Canadian who'd finished a close second at Badwater the year before. Two-time Badwater champ Pam Reed was back, and so was Mr. Badwater himself: Marshall Ulrich, the ultrarunner who'd had his toenails removed. Marshall had not only won Badwater four times, he'd also run the course four times *nonstop*. Once, just for the hell of it, Marshall ran all the way across Death Valley by himself, pushing his food and water in a little bike-wheeled cart. And if Marshall was anything besides tough, it was canny; one of his favorite strategies was to have his crew gradually cover his van's taillights after dark with elec-

trical tape. Runners trying to catch him at night would give up, believing Marshall was disappearing off into the distance when he was only a half mile away.

A few seconds before 10 a.m., someone punched a boom-box button. Hands covered hearts as the national anthem crackled. Just standing there in the full glare of the morning sun was unbearable for everyone but the true Badwater vets, whose savvy showed in their shorts: Pam and Ferg and Mike Sweeney, in silky shorts and muscle tees, looked totally unconcerned about the sun blazing overhead. Scott, on the other hand, could have been entering a biohazard site: he was covered chin to toe in a white sun suit, looking every bit the Minnesota yokel, with his long hair knotted inside a doofy French Foreign Legion cap.

GO! Scott leaped off the line like Braveheart. But for once, his bellow sounded weak and plaintive; it was swallowed in the awesome vastness of the Mojave like an echo from the bottom of a well. Mike Sweeney also had his own way of shutting Scott up: just in case Wonderboy had any plans to hang on Sweeney's shoulder and then get frisky in the final miles, Sweeney was going to open an unbeatable lead right from the start. He could do it, too; in a sport not known for aggression, Sweeney was one of the true tough guys. In his twenties, he had been an Acapulco cliff diver ("I'd pound on the top of my head to toughen it up"), and then became a bar pilot in San Francisco Bay, commanding a crew of seamen who guided massive freight ships. While Scott was enjoying cool, pine-scented breezes in the mountains all summer, Sweeney was fighting a ship's wheel through gale-force wind and jogging in a superheated sauna for up to two hours a day.

Mike Sweeney was leading the field when he came through Furnace Creek shortly before high noon. The thermometer had hit 126 degrees, but Sweeney was unfazed and kept increasing his lead. By mile 72, he had a solid ten miles over Ferg Hawke in second. Sweeney's crew was operating beautifully. As pacers, he had three elite ultrarunners, including a fellow H.U.R.T. 100 champion, Luis Escobar. As nutritionist, he had the perfectly named Sunny Blonde, a beautiful endurance-sports specialist who not only monitored his calories, but hoisted her top and flashed her breasts whenever she felt Sweeney needed perking up.

Team Jerker wasn't quite as well oiled. One of Scott's pacers was fanning him with a sweatshirt, unaware that Scott was too exhausted to complain that the zipper was slashing his back. Scott's wife and his best friend, meanwhile, were at each other's throats. Dusty was annoyed by the way Leah kept trying to motivate Scott by giving him fake pacing splits, while Leah wasn't too pleased with Dusty's habit of calling her husband a fucking pussy.

By mile 60, Scott was vomiting and shaky. His hands dropped to his knees, then his knees dropped to the pavement. He collapsed by the side of the road, lying in his own sweat and spittle. Leah and his friends didn't bother trying to help him up; they knew there was no voice in the world more persuasive than the one inside Scott's own mind.

Scott lay there, thinking about how hopeless it all was. He wasn't even halfway done, and Sweeney was already too far ahead for him to see. Ferg Hawke was halfway up to the Father Crowley lookout, and Scott hadn't even started the climb yet. And the wind! It was like running into the blast of a jet engine. A couple of miles back, Scott had tried to cool off by sinking his entire head and torso into a giant cooler full of ice and holding himself underwater until his lungs were screaming. As soon as he got out, he was roasting again.

There's no way, Scott told himself. You're done. You'd have to do something totally sick to win this thing now.

Sick like what?

Like starting all over again. Like pretending you just woke up from a great night's sleep and the race hasn't even started yet. You'd have to run the next eighty miles as fast as you've ever run eighty miles in your life.

No chance, Jerker.

Yeah. I know.

For ten minutes, Scott lay like a corpse. Then he got up and did it, shattering the Badwater record with a time of 24:36.

King of the trails, king of the road. That 2005 doubleheader was one of the greatest performances in ultraracing history, and it couldn't have come at a better moment: just when Scott was becoming the greatest star in ultrarunning, ultrarunning was getting sexy. There was Dean Karnazes, shucking his shirt for magazine covers and telling David Letterman how he ordered pizzas on his cell phone in

the middle of a 250-mile run. And check out Pam Reed; when Dean announced he was preparing for a 300-mile run, Pam went straight out and ran 301, landing her own Letterman appearance, and a book contract, and one of the greatest magazine headlines ever written:
DESPERATE HOUSEWIFE STALKS MALE SUPERMODEL IN SPORTS DEATH

Soooooo—where was the Scott Jurek memoir? The marketing campaign? The bare-chested treadmill run above Times Square, à la Karnazes? “If you’re talking about hundred-mile races, or longer, on trails, there’s no one in history who comes close to him. If you want to say he’s the greatest all-time ultrarunner, a case could be made for it,” came the judgment from *UltraRunning* editor Don Allison. “He’s got the talent to put him up against anyone.”

So where was he? Long gone. Instead of promoting himself after his glorious summer, Scott and Leah immediately vanished into the deep woods to celebrate in solitude. Scott could give a crap about talk shows; he didn't even own a TV. He'd read Dean's book and Pam's book and all the magazine articles, and they turned his stomach. "Stunts," he muttered; they were taking this beautiful sport, this great gift of flight, and turning it into a freak show.

When he and Leah finally got back to their tiny apartment, Scott found another one of those crazy e-mails waiting for him. He'd been getting them on and off for about two years from some guy who kept signing off with different names: Caballo Loco . . . Caballo Confuso . . . Caballo Blanco. Something about a race, could he come, power to the people, blah blah blah. . . . Usually, Scott gave them a quick scan and clicked them into the trash, but this time, one word caught his eye: *Chingón.*

Whoa. Wasn't that a Spanish F-bomb? Scott didn't know much Spanish, but he recognized curse words when he saw them. Was this crazy Horse guy badmouthing him? Scott read the message again, more carefully this time:

I've been telling the Raramuri that my Apache friend Ramon Chingon says he's going to beat everybody. The tarabumara are more or less good runners compared to the Apaches, the Quimares a little more than less. But the question is, who's more chingon than Ramon?

Who's more chingón than Ramón?

Deciphering Caballo-speak wasn't easy, but as best Scott could make out, it seemed that he—Scott—was supposed to be Ramón Chingón, the Mean Mutha who was going to come down and whomp Tarahumara butt. So this guy he'd never even met was trying to whip up a grudge match between the Tarahumara and their ancient Apache enemies, and he wanted Scott to play the role of masked villain? *Psycho-0-0-0-0* . . .

Scott fingered the delete button, then paused. On the other hand . . . wasn't that exactly what Scott had set out to do? Find the best runners and the toughest courses in the world and conquer them all? Someday no one, not even ultrarunners, would remember the names Pam Reed or Dean Karnazes. But if Scott was as good as he thought he was—if he was as good as he *dared* to be—then he'd run like no one ever had. Scott wasn't settling for best in the world; he

was out to be the best of all time.

But like every champion, he was up against the Curse of Ali: he could beat everyone alive and still lose to guys who were dead (or at least, long retired). Every heavyweight boxer has to hear: "Yeah, you're good, but you'd never a' beat Ali in his prime." Likewise, no matter how many records Scott set, there would always be one unanswered question: what would have happened if he'd been in Leadville in 1994? Could he have whipped Juan Herrera and Team Tarahumara, or would they have run him down like a deer, just like they did the Bruja?

The heroes of the past are untouchable, protected forever by the fortress door of time—unless some mysterious stranger magically turns up with a key. Maybe Scott, thanks to this Caballo character, was the one athlete who could turn back the clock and test himself against the immortals.

Who's more chingón than Ramón?

pinole in my pocket. Was lucky enough to see both Manuel Luna and Felipe Quimare on the same loop, the same day. When I spoke to each of them, I could sense excitement even in the Geronimo like solemnness that is the face of Manuel.

But while things were looking up for Caballo, my end of the operation was maddeningly difficult. Once word hit the grapevine that Jurek might be going toe-to-toe with the Tarahumara, other ultra aces suddenly wanted a piece of the action. But there was no telling how many would really show up—and that included the star attraction himself.

In true Jurek fashion, Scott had told almost no one what he was up to, so word of his plans only began to spread a little more than a month before the race. He'd even kept me guessing, and I was pretty much his point man; Scott e-mailed me a few times with travel questions, but as crunch time approached, he dropped off the radar. Two weeks before race day, I was startled to see a posting on the *Runner's World* message board from a runner in Texas who'd gotten a jolt of his own that morning when he arrived at the starting line of the Austin Marathon and found himself standing next to America's greatest (and contender for most reclusive) ultrarunner.

Austin? Last I'd heard, Scott was supposed to be two thousand miles away at that very moment, crossing Baja with his wife to catch the Chihuahua-Pacific train to Creel. And what was the deal with the urban marathon—why was Scott flying across the country for a junior varsity road race, when he was supposed to be fine-tuning for the showdown of a lifetime on trails? He was up to something, no doubt about it; and as usual, whatever strategy he was developing remained locked in his own head.

So, until the moment I arrived in El Paso, Texas, that Saturday, I had no idea if I was leading a platoon or hucking solo. I checked into the airport Hilton, made arrangements for a ride across the border at five the next morning, then doubled back to the airport. I was pretty sure I was wasting my time, but there was a chance I'd be picking up Jenn "Mookie" Shelton and Billy "Bonehead" Barnett, a pair of twenty-one-year-old hotshots who'd been electrifying the East Coast ultra circuit, at least whenever they weren't otherwise occupied surfing, partying, or posting bail for simple assault (Jenn), disor-

CHAPTER 20



NINE MONTHS LATER, I found myself back on the Mexican border with a ticking clock and zero margin for error. It was Saturday evening, February 25, 2006, and I had twenty-four hours to find Caballo again.

As soon as he got a reply from Scott Jurek, Caballo began setting up a trapeze act of logistics. He only had a tiny window of opportunity, since the race couldn't take place during the fall harvest, the winter rainy season, or the blistering heat of summer, when many of the Tarahumara migrate toward cooler caves higher in the canyons. Caballo also had to avoid Christmas, Easter Week, the Fiesta Guadalupana and at least a half-dozen traditional wedding weekends.

Caballo finally figured he could wedge the race in on Sunday, March 5. Then the real tricky work began: because he'd barely have enough time to Paul Revere from village to village to announce the race logistics, he had to figure out exactly where and when the Tarahumara runners should meet up with us on the hike to the race-course. If he miscalculated, it was over; it was already a tremendous long shot that any Tarahumara would show up, and if they got to the meeting spot and we were a no-show, they'd be gone.

Caballo made his best-guess estimates, then set off into the canyons to spread the word, as he messaged me a few weeks later:

Ran 30 some miles out to Tarahumara country and back today, like the messenger that I am. The message fueled me more than the bag of

derly conduct (Billy), or public indecency (both, for a burst of trail-side passion that resulted in an arrest and community service).

Jenn and Billy had only started running two years before, but Billy was already winning some of the toughest 50ks on the East Coast, while “the young and beautiful Jenn Shelton,” as the ultrarace blogger Joey Anderson called her, had just clocked one of the fastest 100-mile times in the country. “If this young lady could swing a tennis racket as well as she runs,” Anderson wrote, “she would be one of the richest women in sports with all the sponsors she would attract.”

I’d spoken to Jenn once on the phone, and while she and Billy were wildly eager to join the trek into the Copper Canyons, I didn’t see any way they’d pull it off. She and the Bonehead had no money, no credit cards, and no time off from school: they were both still in college and Caballo’s race was smack in the middle of midterms, meaning they’d flunk the semester if they skipped out. But two days before my flight to El Paso, I suddenly got this frantic e-mail:

*Wait for us! we can get in by 8:10 pm.
El Paso is Texas, right?*

After that—silence. On the slim chance that Jenn and Billy had actually found the right city and finagled their way onto a flight, I headed over to the airport for a look around. I’d never met them, but their outlaw reputation created a pretty vivid mental image. When I got to baggage claim, I immediately locked in on a couple who looked like teenage runaways hitchhiking to Lollapalooza.

“Jenn?” I asked.

“Right on!”

Jenn was wearing flip-flops, surf shorts, and a tie-dyed T-shirt. Her summer-wheat hair was in braids, giving her the look of a blonder, lesser-known Longstocking. She was pretty and petite enough to pass for a figure skater, an image she’d tried in the past to scrub up by shaving her head down to stubble and getting a big, black vampire bat tattooed on her right forearm, only discovering later that it was a dead ringer for the Bacardi rum logo. “Whatever,” Jenn said with a shrug. “Truth in advertising.”

Billy shared Jenn’s raw good looks and beach-bum wardrobe. He had a tribal tattoo across the back of his neck and thick sideburns that

blended into shaggy, sun-streaked hair. With his flowery board shorts and ripped surfer’s build, he looked—to Jenn, at least—“like some little yeti who raided your underwear drawer.”

“I can’t believe you guys made it,” I said. “But there’s been a change of plans. Scott Jurek isn’t going to be meeting us in Mexico.”

“Oh, fuck me,” Jenn said. “I knew this was too good to be true.”

“He came here instead.” On my way to the airport, I’d spotted two guys jogging across the parking lot. They were too far away for me to see their faces, but their smooth-glide strides gave them away. After quick introductions, they’d headed to the bar while I continued to the airport.

“Scott’s here?”

“Yup. I just saw him on the way over. He’s back at the hotel bar with Luis Escobar.”

“Scott drinks?”

“Looks that way.”

“Suh-weet!!”

Jenn and Billy grabbed their gear—a Nike shopping bag with a chiropractic stick jutting out the top and a duffel with the tail of a sleeping bag stuck in the zipper—and we began heading across the parking lot.

“So what’s Scott like?” Jenn asked. Ultrarunning, like rap music, was split by geography; as East Coast playas, Jenn and Billy had done most of their racing close to home and hadn’t yet crossed paths (or swords) with many of the West Coast elites. To them—to just about all ultrarunners, actually—Scott was as much of a mythic figure as the Tarahumara.

“I only caught a glimpse of him myself,” I said. “Pretty tough guy to read, I can tell you that much.”

Right there, I should have shut my stupid mouth. But who can predict when the trivial will become tragic? How could I have known that a friendly gesture, like giving Caballo my running shoes, would nearly cost him his life? Likewise, I never suspected that the next ten words out of my mouth would snowball into disaster:

“Maybe,” I suggested, “you can get him drunk and loosen him up.”