

Is Everyone Hanging Out
Without Me? Mundy
Rating (cont)

I Am Not an Athlete

I KNOW, I KNOW. Did you put down this book in surprise?

I've always been *extremely* bad at anything athletic. I know it sounds like hyperbole here, but this isn't like when I exclaim "I love that dress so much I want to kill myself." This is for real.

The strange thing is, I love watching certain sports as much as I detest participating in them myself. In the early 1980s, when my family was fixated on the Celtics-Lakers rivalry, I sat in front of the TV with them, thinking Larry Bird was the handsomest man in the world.* But if handed an actual basketball, I would instantly begin to cry. For me, doing sports was like meeting the Disney characters at Disney World. On TV I loved Mickey Mouse, but when I met the actual real-life Mickey, or rather, his impersonator, and he tried to hug me in his warm, fuzzy suit, I recoiled in fear.

PART ONE: BIKES

I learned to ride a bike at age twelve. That was crazy old for my neighborhood. I had been successfully avoiding learning for

* At the age of six, the criteria for handsome was, simply: "Is he not related to me?" and "Have I seen him on television?" That was it. By this standard, Larry Bird, Dick Clark, Andy Rooney. All handsome guys.

years, mostly by making a big show that I couldn't be torn away from whatever book I was reading. If my parents have any soft spot, it is for books, and I knew that the best way to get out of chores, or sports, or talking to elderly relatives on the phone was by holding up a book and saying, "But I'm just enjoying *Little House on the Prairie* so much!" I may have read the entire Laura Ingalls Wilder canon simply to get out of raking the lawn with my brother. But when other girls in my grade were starting to get their periods and I still didn't know how to ride a bike, the jig was glaringly up.

My dad finally had to get serious about this. Maybe he was worried I would go through life not participating in one of the Great American pastimes. Maybe he thought I had the potential to become a great cyclist. Or maybe he thought riding a bike would be a great way to flee assailants. Presumably he just wanted me to fit in with the kids who biked around, and to make some friends, and not be that strange girl who stayed in every weekend watching *The Golden Girls* with her mom.

Fueling my fight against my dad's wishes was my enormous dislike of bikes. Bikes were horrible. Bikes always seemed to be scratching against my legs, or the spoke was poking me or something. Pebbles ended up in my ankle socks when I was on a bike. The seat felt sharp and hurt my crotch. The bike represented everything annoying and uncomfortable in my young life.

Wearing elbow pads, knee pads, and a helmet, I took my bike to the parking lot behind the Beth Shalom synagogue across the street. Dad came with me, holding two huge bottles of Gatorade. I was obsessed with not getting dehydrated while learning to ride a bike. It took me a week to find my balance, because once I took both feet off the ground, I employed the ace move of closing my eyes out of fear.

"What are you doing? Open your eyes!" my dad shouted.

So, it turns out that keeping your eyes open is the key to

learning to ride a bike. Once I mastered balance, my dad left me alone to do bike drills so I'd have it ingrained. "Doing drills until it's ingrained" is actually a classic Indian technique of teaching children things that goes back to Sanskrit liturgical texts. Index cards and Sharpie pens are actually distinctly Indian cultural artifacts to me. I rode my bike, for hours, around the parking lot behind Beth Shalom. Let me remind you that this was before iPods. This was even before those bright yellow sports Walkmans. With no music to listen to, I just biked around in circles talking to myself like a kid on the cover of a Robert Cormier young adult novel, circling around puzzled Jewish families walking back to their cars. This is how I learned to ride a bike.

What my dad didn't realize at the time was that while I was cementing the mechanics of riding the bike, I was also cementing my hatred for doing it. I just decided I hated it, and that was that. You cannot begin to understand the power of my irrational hatred at twelve years old, but it's the kind of hatred that lasts. It was the same mysterious and powerful hatred that reared its head later in life for other things, like hiking, orientation games, and having to watch any kind of pageant whatsoever.

PART TWO: FRISBEE

Even though I wisely chose a group of friends who weren't too athletic, the Frisbee has been a recurring nuisance in my life. Frisbee, or "disc," as I have been corrected angrily many times, is one of the few sports artsy kids like to do, and so we've inevitably crossed paths. A good thing to know about me is that I'm terrible at Frisbee and I hate playing it so much. Catching it, obviously (I mean, close your eyes. Can you seriously picture me catching a Frisbee? No! You can't even picture it *in your imagination*) but throwing as well. It always goes down like this: my

Frisbee enthusiast friends insist that I would love Frisbee if I were taught how to throw. I decline. They persist, and I relent. So after careful instruction by my friends—but really, who has ever been able to make use of the advice “it’s all in the wrist”?—I give it a shot. I hurl the Frisbee (at some crazy-fast speed and far distance; I have always had meaty, strong arms) in completely the wrong direction until it lands on the other side of the park.

Unlike other athletes, Frisbee people won’t let it go. My theory is that this is because there’s a huge overlap between people who are good at Frisbee and people who do Teach for America. The same instinct to make at-risk kids learn, which I admire so much, becomes deadly when turned on friends trying to relax on a Sunday afternoon in the park. They feel they have to corral me into learning this useless sport. The afternoon becomes “unlocking Mindy’s passion for Frisbee,” instead of letting me lie on the grass reading my chick lit book. How dare you? If I had thought learning Frisbee was a valuable thing to do, I would’ve done it. I don’t want to learn! I don’t want to learn! Let me read *Shopaholic Runs for Congress* in peace!

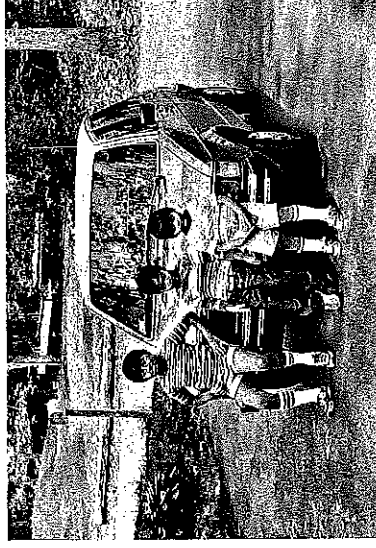
PART THREE: ROPES

There is a famous photo of my older brother, Vijay, my cousin Hondo, and me climbing ropes at the Josiah Willard Hayden Recreation Centre in Lexington, Massachusetts, in 1984, when we were seven, six, and five years old, respectively. Famous in the sense that the local newspaper, *The TAB*, ran the picture for some reason. I guess the sight of three little Indian kids in roughly identical outfits with roughly the same haircut climbing ropes was interesting to their readers. But I remember, even as a five-year-old, thinking, *Why am I being made to do this? I never see Mom and Dad climbing ropes! You can’t tell me this is useful!*

What the photo didn’t show was that after it was taken,

I climbed all the way up, which took me about forty minutes. Once at the top, I didn’t like the view and refused to climb down. Also my thighs were badly chafed and I had to go to the bathroom. Eventually, my counselors had to hoist up a ladder and pull me down, much to the embarrassment of Vijay and Hondo. I’m pretty sure Vijay claimed that Hondo was his sibling and I was the cousin.

Luckily the rope fiasco was eclipsed, several weeks later, when I accidentally pronounced *jalapeno* with a hard *j* in front of Vijay, Hondo, and some other campers. I’d only ever seen it printed on the side of a can of salsa. “You think it’s *ja-lapeno*?!” Hondo asked, incredulous. I did.



Vijay, Hondo, and me in descending order.

PART FOUR: MORSES POND

Amazingly, there is actually another instance from my childhood where I froze in the middle of an athletic pursuit, and it was much more serious. It occurred at Wellesley Summer Day Camp, where my brother and I were shipped out to as kids in the ’80s. The camp made daily visits to Morses Pond in Wellesley, Massachusetts. I didn’t like Morses Pond because there was no snack

bar or gift shop like at Walden Pond. Where it had a significant leg up over Walden was that at least it didn't have a scary ghost haunting it, which is who I assumed Henry David Thoreau was, and why everyone made such a big deal about him. A few years after I swam there as a kid, they made Morses Pond off-limits to swimmers. Apparently, it was saturated with contaminated soil from an abandoned paint factory. To its credit, I only remember it teeming with Canadian geese poop. Then, a few years after it was condemned, a rich physician hired a hit man to murder his wife there. This really happened. I know what you're thinking: Morses Pond? More like *Remorses Pond!* But now it's open again.



I took this photo one busy summer afternoon.

Note: if you want to seem like a super-creepy person, be an adult, by yourself, taking photos of children and people on a beach.

As a kid, I was curious but not remotely adventurous, if that makes sense. I wanted to climb the diving board to see the view out to the other side of Morses Pond, but I didn't want to swim over there. The far side of the pond was so filled with weeds and algae that it was a pretty copper-y color, and I wanted to get a better view. Once I got to the top of the ladder to the div-

ing board, I could see way across the pond. The weeds and algae were indeed very pretty. Even further out, I saw Wellesley Center, where my favorite children's bookstore was. I was glad I did it, and I turned to climb down.

That's when Scott, the handsome counselor who was wading in the deep end of the pond, yelled up at me. (Again, not sure if he was actually handsome, or just handsome by my aforementioned criteria.)

SCOTT: You're not allowed to climb back down the ladder! You have to dive!

I froze. This was the big-kid diving board and it really was extremely high. I inched backward, pretending not to hear.

SCOTT: Don't even think about it. It's against the rules. Once you're up there, there's only one way down.

ME: Is that the camp's rules or the pond's rules?

There was a pause as Scott thought about this. It annoyed him that I had a follow-up question.

SCOTT: It's the same. You *cannot* climb back down!

ME: I really don't want to jump.

SCOTT: Well, you're just going to stand there, then.

Two bigger kids were now standing at the base of the ladder, impatiently waiting for their turn.

I think it was the most scared I've ever been in my life. I was too scared to jump off, but I was also scared of getting in trouble

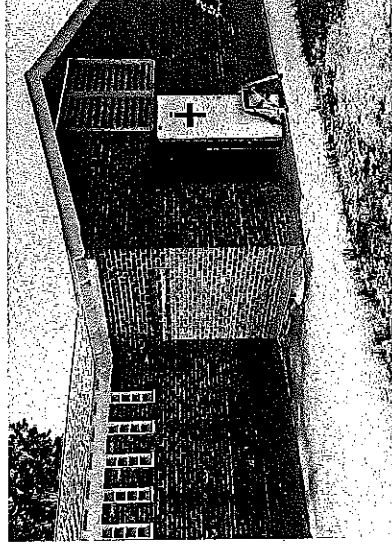
with the camp and of bringing shame to my family. And, most important, embarrassing Vijay. (Summers at this point were just a terrifying countdown to the moment when I would somehow embarrass my poor older brother, whose shame stung worse than my own. Would I eat too many Popsicles at lunch, leaving none for some other kid and leave myself open to ridicule as Popsicle Pig? Would I get a mud stain on the back of my shorts and become Shitty Pants?)

Scott probably thought he was doing something really good for me, or maybe this was something his mean stepdad did to him and he was exorcising the bad experience on me, but whatever he was trying to do, it sucked. All I remember is crazy, panicky, ice-cold fear shooting through my limbs. Unable to say, “Screw you, dude, I’m going down the ladder, and I’m going to call my mom from the payphone to pick me up and take me home,” I closed my eyes and just let myself fall into the water.

The sight of a fat child falling, lifeless, from a high distance into a pond is kind of an amazing sight, I’ll bet. You know when a kid’s getting a shot or a tooth removed, how you tell them that it’s not going to be as bad as they’re imagining it will be? Well, this was a hundred times worse than what I had imagined.

First of all, it *hurt*. I don’t know how it happened, but I got a huge cut from falling into the water. (It was on the back of my left knee; to this day, I have a four-inch dark brown scar there.) Three people, including Scott, pulled me out of the water. They rushed me to shore, to the First Aid room, which, weirdly, had injections for anaphylactic shock and an eye wash but no paper towels. Scott patted down the back of my leg with beach towels.

Ultimately they got it to stop bleeding, and Scott begged me not to tell my parents. I remember him asking me four or five times. God knows what that must’ve looked like to an observer, a seventeen-year-old boy exhorting a disoriented, bleed-



The scene of the cover-up.

ing six-year-old “not to tell her parents” something. But this was Moses Pond, and that’s the kind of thing that happened there.

Lessons? When I was a kid, my parents smartly raised us to keep quiet, be respectful to older people, and generally not question adults all that much. I think that’s because they were assuming that 99 percent of time, we’d be interacting with worthy, smart adults, like my aunts and uncles; my teachers; my ancient and knowledgeable piano instructor, Mrs. Brewster; and police officers. They didn’t ever tell me, “Sometimes you will meet idiots who are technically adults and authority figures. You don’t have to do what they say. You can calmly say, ‘Can I first call my mom and ask if I have to do this, please?’ ” But we didn’t have cell phones back then. The only people with cell phones were rich villains in action movies you knew were going to die first.

When I have kids I will largely follow how my parents raised me, because, like everyone else on the planet, I think my parents are perfect and so am I. But one thing I will impart to my children is “If you’re scared of something, that isn’t a sign that you have to do it. It probably means you *shouldn’t* do it. Call Dad or Mom immediately.”

A handful of bad experiences when I was small have made me a confirmed nonathlete. In psychology (okay, *Twilight*) they teach you about the notion of imprinting, and I think it applies here. I reverse-imprinted with athleticism. Ours is the great non-love story of my life.

Don't Peak in High School

SOMETIMES TEENAGE girls ask me for advice about what they should be doing if they want a career like mine one day. There are basically two ways to get where I am: (1) learn a provocative dance and put it on YouTube; (2) convince your parents to move to Orlando and homeschool you until you get cast on a kids' show, *or* do what I did, which is (3) stay in school and be a respectful and hardworking wallflower, and go to an accredited non-online university.

Teenage girls, please don't worry about being super popular in high school, or being the best actress in high school, or the best athlete. Not only do people not care about any of that the second you graduate, but when you get older, if you reference your successes in high school too much, it actually makes you look kind of pitiful, like some babbling old Tennessee Williams character with nothing else going on in her current life. What I've noticed is that almost no one who was a big star in high school is also big star later in life. For us overlooked kids, it's so wonderfully *fair*.

I was never the lead in the play. I don't think I went to a single party with alcohol at it. No one offered me pot. It wasn't until I was sixteen that I even knew marijuana and pot were the same thing. I didn't even learn this from a cool friend; I gleaned it