

Go West, Not-So-Young Woman

aka Lust in the Dust.

BY RACHEL TOOR

You know the Saul Steinberg cartoon of the view of the world from New York City? It's the one where Manhattan is huge and the rest of the world is barely squeezed into the background. Regionalism, friends, is strong in this country.

I was once one of those parochial New Yorkers. I didn't become a runner until I had moved to a place I never thought I'd live: the South.

During my first years in Durham, North Carolina, I traded my black clothes, martinis, and cigarettes for running shorts, Gatorade, and GU. As I shed the trappings of urban life, I tried to strip away the prejudices endemic to New Yorkers. I learned that the South is a complex place, its placid surfaces often belying a rich intensity. I also learned that the South has as much regional jingoism as anywhere else: one of the most damning things you can say to an outsider is, "You're not from around here, are you?"

Regional pride runs deep, too, in California.

California. I spent my last summer as a 30-something in the foothills of the northern Sierra Nevada. Milton wrote, "Space may produce new worlds." He wasn't kidding. The brown and shrubby hills created a new me, hewn tough in shrubby manzanita and gold dust. The California mountains, like many of the Californians I met, are craggy and strong. There's a freshness, an untrammelled quality that is a counterpoise to the jaded, worn-out cynicism of a lot of us East Coasters. The edges have not been smoothed out, on the people or the places.

Traces of the frontier spirit are still visible in the West. They are manifest in a gameness, a disregard of tradition. I asked Gordy Ainsleigh why he decided to run the Western States trail nearly 30 years ago. His horse had come up lame for the Tevis Cup, and by running the 100-mile trail in the same sub-24-hour time as the top horses, he essentially created the sport of ultramarathon trail running.

"Because they said it couldn't be done," he answered, as if it were a stupid question. This is a California man, born and bred.

In Gordy's wake, a host of trail races sprang up in the West. His neighborhood, the area around Auburn, California, where the Western States race ends, is perhaps

the epicenter of trail running in the United States. It's home not only to some of the biggest and best ultras—the American River 50-miler, the Way Too Cool 50K, and innumerable other, smaller ones—but also to some of the most awe-inspiring runners of the trail.

There's a great and good sense of community among the people who spend weekends together, competing against each other but really competing against the terrain that they love so much. There's a pride of place that emanates from their belief that they live in paradise. In a region that hosts a shocking number of 100-mile races, no one is impressed when you say that you are going out to do a 25-mile training run.

People's work lives seem less essential than they do back East. There are few hints of educational snobbery. People read, or they don't. They watch TV, or they don't. They eat their avocados and think you nuts if you claim, rightly, that these are slimy and repulsive vegetables.

But the Californians are out on the trails in rain, snow, sleet, and hail. The heat of the day does not keep them at home. Men in races are accustomed to being routinely trounced by their distaff companions. Western women pee standing up.

I had been asked to house- and horse-sit for friends who lived in a tiny miner's cabin in the suburbs of Nevada City, a "city" of about 3,000 people. The town I was in was a ghost town, what used to be French Corral. It was the home of the first long-distance telephone line and was, during the gold-rush era, a bustling little place. By the time I got there, bustling had long since ceased.

My friends were spending their summer riding horses from Missouri to California, a different brand of Manifest Destiny. All I had to do was tend to the remaining three horses, a one-eyed dog named Bud, and Chloe, a cat improbably missing the complementary eye. I figured living isolated in the land of the Cyclops would provide me with an opportunity to get a lot of writing done. And I decided, in order not to be distracted, that this would be a summer without boys.

I had just broken up with another in a long line of academic-type boyfriends and was sick, sick, sick to death of relationships. Sick of all the talk, all the whining, all of the expressions of feelings all the time. So many feelings. Sometimes feelings should be left unexpressed. Academic men are not good at not expressing themselves. (We often most resist that which reminds us of ourselves: I am known among my friends for having no unexpressed thoughts.) The hardest thing was that, at best, these eggheaded men didn't understand my running; at worst they resented it, complaining loudly and frequently about the time I spent in the company of other men, about the fact that I bolted out of bed early on Sunday mornings to jump into running clothes and hit the trails. More often than I would have liked, their response on first embracing me was to pull back, saying, "Your body, it's so—" and there would be a pause, a look of, what? Shock? Confusion? Horror? "It's so hard," is what they would say.

They didn't understand, these weedy men, these men who said they loved my hard mind, my sharp wit, my wished-for softness, why I was so committed to running. They couldn't conceive that the difference between a 3:14 marathon and a 3:16 marathon was so much more than two minutes. Why did I enjoy punishing myself, running so hard on the track that I wanted to throw up, when clearly, my real talents lay in the tracks of the mind? Even those who ran were confounded by the fact that my Saturday run was often more than their weekly mileage. I was tired of justifying what I knew seemed more like pathology than hobby. No more. Horses, dog, cat, computer: these would be my summer companions in California.

TIRES

I have come here to write, but I have not been writing. I have been helping Pat, a neighbor, with his daily work. He's 61; short; 5 feet, 7 (he's told me this a number of times, without embarrassment, it's just a fact), with stumpy bowed legs, a tanned and lined face, and startling blue eyes. He always has a cap on his white-haired head. He's a logger and has been into a bunch of get-rich schemes, none of which seem to have made him more financially comfortable.

Because he thought, somehow, that it would be lucrative, he bought thousands of old tires a long time ago and had them dumped—to store—on a piece of land in the diggings, the old gold-mining territory. Now the county has told him that he must get rid of them. So we have been spending days loading the tires into 45-foot-long trailers to be hauled away. I had no idea there were so many sizes and shapes of tires. Cars, trucks, motorcycles, utility vehicles. Some are little and worn down. Many are huge, heavy. Pat drives a loader, a piece of yellow heavy machinery with two long arms. He uses these arms as if they were extensions of his hands to pick up individual tires, sometimes scooping up four or five at a time. He settles them under a wooden pallet, which we then fill with little to medium-size tires.

Some of them are filled with water. All of them are dirty. It's hot and dusty in the trailer, and we are quickly covered with a patina of dirt. I am working hard. I see the enormous pile of tires, and it makes me anxious. I want to load them quickly, to make the pile smaller. We load and load, and it's like trying to eat a huge plate of pasta. You keep eating and the heap doesn't get any smaller and you get more and more full and it feels like eating the world.

"Pace yourself," Pat says. "These tires ain't going anywhere."

He loads them carefully against the back wall of the trailer, stacking them efficiently, figuring out the spacial relations in ways that baffle me. When it comes time to make a second tier of huge truck tires on top of the first row, he makes a series of steps out of different-size tires and rolls them up. I would not have figured out to do that. I watch him stack. My usefulness is in my physical labor and willingness to work. I am no good at figuring this stuff out. This is hard work. But for me, it is not as hard as writing.

“That’s enough for today,” Pat calls out. And we quit.

“You wanna help me drive cattle tomorrow morning?” he asks. “Be here at five.”

I show up and he tells me that he’s going to put me on the little buckskin mustang.

“This fat horse?” I ask, looking at a portly fellow.

“Yeah,” he says.

“He’s barefoot,” I say.

“Yeah. I didn’t have time to shoe the Arab that you’re going to be riding later.”

He shows me how he wants his horse handled. What I’ve learned from being around horses and horse people is that there are a million different ways to do the same things. The correct way, I’ve discovered, is the way you are told by the owner of the horse.

He throws an English saddle on the fat little mustang, and we let the girth out to the last hole. It barely fits. He slips a hackamore over his head; no bit for my cow horse. He puts a big western saddle on Willy, an Arab-quarter horse cross, and we load them into the trailer and haul them down the road to where the cows are.

We have brought with us Jack, a border collie, and Bob, an Australian cattle dog. Jack is a worker. Pat gave me a demonstration of his abilities earlier. He put Jack into a pen with chickens and ducks. He told Jack to separate out the ducks. He did.

I am wearing black Lycra running tights and a long-sleeve crimson Harvard T-shirt given to me by an ex-boyfriend. I am to do that old, important, cowboy task: to ride the point, at the head of the herd, and slow down the cars that will be whipping and winding down the road. We have 32 head of cattle to move, including three bulls and a longhorn steer, a guy with hugely long horns and a tendency to moo.

I ride the mustang out front, and the cars see me and slow. Some of the drivers act like it’s the most natural thing in the world to see a woman on horseback riding in the middle of the asphalt road followed by 30 cows being herded by a dog, and they ask whether they have to wait or can make their way through the herd.

“Go on through,” I tell them, parroting what Pat has said to say.

Other people express surprise and delight when they see our ragtag group. A number tell me that my horse is pretty. I thank them.

It’s still early and a bit chilly. The cows amble slowly up the road; it’s almost entirely uphill, the four miles we have to travel. They stop by the side of the road and eat. Each time there is a side road or a driveway, they try to turn. Pat yells to Jack to “Get ahead, get ahead,” and the sleek dog zooms into place, keeping the cows on the right path. I have to stop frequently and wait for them to catch up. A guy comes by in a pickup. “Nice way to spend a morning,” he says. I agree. It’s good out here in the West.

Printer: Insert Mad City Marathon ad

FINDING A POSSE

After a week I had sore, but surely stronger, arms and no writing done. I had run a marathon my first weekend in California, a tiny trail race in nearby Nevada City with so few women in it that I was able to grab myself the women's title. I had been running on the country roads near my cabin after working with Pat but was itching to get on the trails that I knew lined this area. I called up some folks I knew, runners and riders both, and discovered that there was a regular Wednesday evening run that left from the Auburn overlook.

Stopping four times to get directions to the Auburn overlook, I finally found it and hooked up with fellow runners, some of whom I knew, others I met. We hit the trails and I found my bliss. Down and up canyons, over the Coffey Dam, these trails were what I had been looking for. I saw my summer stretch before me, gorgeous: mornings writing, dusty afternoon hours in this wilderness. Who needs boys when you have such splendid geography?

I was running with a woman I knew only vaguely, and she was telling me that a mutual friend, a man I had briefly dated during a previous California stint, had gone into a two-year-long tailspin after I had dumped him.

"But it wasn't a real relationship," I said.

"He thought it was," she countered.

"I can't help what he thought," I said, defensive, with the dim recognition that this was a manly answer.

We ran in silence as we began the climb back up to the overlook.

I was surprised when another runner caught up to us. We had left the rest of our group long ago, having speeded up during what turned out to be a tense conversation. She knew this guy and introduced us. She was slowing down, she said; we should just go on ahead.

He looked to me like a mosquito. His yellow sunglasses combined with an oversized nose and beaky hat made for a less-than-appealing picture. But he was friendly and talkative, and the climb was long and steep, so I settled in to listen to him.

We did a little of the usual, where are you from, what do you do, though he asked not many questions.

We made it back to the overlook. He had another 15 or so miles to run that day, training, as he was, for the Wasatch 100-miler in Utah in early fall. We were both, it turned out, taking part in the Western States 100-mile race, coming up in two weeks, he running 50 miles as part of the safety patrol, I planning on pacing a friend from North Carolina.

We rejoined the rest of the group, and I took the opportunity to show off an advance copy of my soon-to-be-published book. My new friend, the Mosquito, appeared interested not in the least. He did ask for my phone number, which I did

not provide because I could not, having failed to commit it to memory. I gave him my e-mail address, a preferred mode of communication. He volunteered his, and I drove 45 minutes back up Highway 49, following the gold-rush trail back to my miner's cabin.

He e-mailed the next day and called as soon as I gave out the phone number. He was having some friends over for a run and a barbecue that weekend, would I like to come? Eager for a social life that went beyond hay, kibble, and tires, I asked for directions to his house.

THE WAY TO A WOMAN'S HEART: TRAILS AND FOOD

There were only four of us running. The other two, a man and a woman, were both tapering for Western States, so this was to be an easy 10 miles. Easy for them. I struggled to keep up and felt only slightly better when I learned about the running bona fides of my companions. Unwittingly, I had entered the company of ultrarunning big dogs.

For dinner we were joined by more elite ultrarunners. All the talk was of the upcoming race. It was a rare treat for me to be in a conversation where no one treated the idea of running 100 miles in one day as anything other than just what you did for fun. Everyone around the table had some connection to this year's Western States, either as a runner, a pacer, or crew member. *Toto*, I said to myself, Kansas is far, far away.

A few days later, the Mosquito called inviting me to join him on a weekly Wednesday evening run, this one leaving from the Cool fire station. I had been planning on rejoining the group I had run with the previous week, but he convinced me that I would be missing some fine California scenery if I did that. So I agreed to meet him at the fire station.

A number of folks had trailered their horses in and were tacking up and getting ready to hit the trails. Riders and runners passed each other companionably. When the Mosquito showed up, he was alone. When I asked where the other runners were, he said they had bailed, it was just us.

So we set out. We ran along a portion of the Western States racecourse. He pointed out places the trail forked and noted that they would look different in the dark, during my pacing duties. He ran easily, climbing strongly up the hills and flying down with a confidence and sure-footedness that took my breath away. I could barely keep up and knew he was slowing his pace for me.

"I'm not in a hurry," he said, when I offered that he should feel free to go on ahead.

It was a good run, a 15-mile loop. We got back and I collapsed atop the picnic table, leaving a shadow of sweat on it.

"There's a lot of steak and chicken left from the barbecue," he said.

FRAILTY, THY NAME IS RACHEL

It was supposed to be the summer without boys. I had a book to write. I was looking forward to living unfettered by others' desires, others' moods. He wasn't my type. We saw each other a lot after that.

RUNNING TOGETHER AND APART

Like quantum mechanics, like eating, like the weather, trail running provides good fodder for metaphors, for thinking and talking about life. As I run down the Western States trail during a 25-mile training run that will take about six hours—there are about 8,000 feet to climb as we go from Michigan Bluff to Last Chance and then back again—I think about my running partner and think that running like this, on this trail, is an apt metaphor for relationships. We are different people, that is clear. Our strengths do not match up, but they do complement. He is faster and stronger than I; he's been doing this a lot longer. He's got testosterone. He's prepared. He carries a pack with 100 ounces of water and a pump to filter more from the crystal clear but perhaps micro-organism-ridden streams and rivers. He has food. He has toilet paper.

Me, I have a lot of energy and enthusiasm and a kind of quirky way of looking at the world. I talk a lot. I'm a decent runner but haven't had much experience on climbs like these. I don't want to slow him down; I ask that he run ahead of me. If he's behind, I'll worry that I'm holding him up. If he's just a little ahead of me on the uphill, I'll kill myself to keep up with him. I don't want to do that. I want him out of sight. So we end up, much of the time, running alone but toward the same goal. We know where we're headed and we'll each make it there, in our own ways. We trust that we will end up together.

He waits at the top of the hard climbs for me. We run downhill together. Fast. We talk about what we've seen. He has been on this trail a bazillion times.

"What's that like?" I ask, pointing toward a sign for the Deadwood Cemetery.

"Don't know," he says. "Never been up there."

"Come on, then," I say. "Let's go."

"Gravity is your friend," he says, as he floats down the steep canyons, pulling ahead of me. When we stop, I tell him no, it's more than just gravity. It's about the fundamental laws of physics: momentum. Bodies in motion like to keep going. I mention that I've been thinking about my friend Julius, whose father was the president of a historically black college and likes to quote JFK: "Move with vigor," the black Southern academic minister would say to his children, Bostonianly not pronouncing the final *r*.

"I like that," he says. "Move with vigor."

I don't, at this point, move with much. It's hot and I'm getting tired. The next time I catch up to him he says I need to eat an energy bar.

“Don’t want to.”

“You need to.” Gently, firmly. “Just one bite,” he says. I eat the whole thing. He asks, after we’ve been running again for about 15 minutes, how I feel. I feel great, I tell him.

We run apart and together. While solo I think. Sometimes I look. On the hard ups, I just try to keep moving. I watch as he pulls away from me, climbing the canyon, running strongly, powerfully, beautifully. It gives me pleasure, watching him go. He doesn’t worry about my catching up; he knows I will.

CLOUD’S REST

We learn that I am good for four good hours. After that, I can still run but I lose sentences. I get down to single words: “Tired.” “Hungry.” “Water.” “Pee.” And some occasional phrases: “How much more?” At that point, I do not want to be touched. If he comes too close, I bark out, threatening to bite.

But before that, when I’m good, it’s good. We travel to run. We go to Squaw Valley and run high above Tahoe. We explore the trails on the Nevada side of the lake. We take a trip to Utah and run on the Wasatch Front trail. We go to Yosemite and start at Tuolumne Meadows, run down, stopping at Cloud’s Rest to have a bite, which I share with a friendly squirrel. We continue through an Ansel Adams photograph. He wants to make a detour and go up Half Dome.

“I don’t want to do that,”

“But the view is incredible. You have to see it.”

We see a line, a long line, of ants slowly making their way up. The ants are people, crowds.

“I’m not gonna like this,” I tell him, more afraid of the crowds than the climb.

“Come on,” he says, and we do it. I do not like it. I did not come to the California mountains for crowds.

We end up, 28 miles later, at the base. I have gone past my four good hours, and now I’m downright cranky.

“I don’t ever run more than 26.2 miles without getting an SMO.”

“What’s an SMO?”

“A shiny metal object.” It doesn’t have to be shiny, or metal, but I am a material girl and I like to mark my achievements materially.

“Oh,” he says. “How about some peanut M&M’s?”

THE END OF SUMMER

It should have ended when my friends came back, when I left California for my own home, my books, my writing, my life. It should have ended then. We knew this. We had talked about it. It was clear and obvious.

MITCHELL FALLS

As fall turned into winter, I decided that I wanted to celebrate my 40th birthday by running the gnarliest, nastiest race I could find on my own turf, to regain a sense of myself as a tough runner of trails. And there it was: the Black Mountain Marathon and Mount Mitchell Challenge. It seemed a perfect combination of ancient eastern mountains and vibrant intellectual and cultural life.

Western North Carolina kind of combines the best of the Northeast and the West. The tiny town that hosted the marathon had also been home to Black Mountain College, which in the years of its existence—1933 to 1956—was a hotbed of alternative education in America, a Greenwich Village in the mountain range they call the Blacks. The roster of faculty and students in attendance reads like a greatest hits of the avant-garde: Josef and Anni Albers, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Walter Gropius, Jacob Lawrence, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Alfred Kazin, Paul Goodman, William Carlos Williams, Robert Rauschenberg, Buckminster Fuller, Charles Olsen, Robert Creeley—art, music, dance, literary criticism, poetry, you name it, the big dogs were there. In a pastoral setting, culture bubbled. It still does.

The mountains themselves are surprising, with an ecosystem that is as diverse as you will find outside a tropical rain forest and a climate more like Canada's than that of the South. The variety of plant and animal species is mind boggling because of peculiarities of glacial movements in the past. Mount Mitchell, at 6,684 feet, is, to the astonishment of many, in fact the highest peak east of the Mississippi. The exploration of the area was undertaken in large part by Dr. Elisha Mitchell, who like a true trail runner, climbed and trod the difficult terrain in an effort to prove in the first half of the 19th century that these were the highest measured mountains in the United States.

In 1857, while out exploring, he slipped on a rocky ledge above a waterfall and fell to his death. The place is called, in what could be considered a bad pun, Mitchell Falls. In a 1915 account of Mitchell's exploration, C. Hodge Mathes wrote: "The only way to see Mount Mitchell or any of the vast wonderland of the Black Mountains was to go afoot, picking one's way through the eternal twilight of virgin forest along ancient trails that buffaloes, bears, and Indians had made long before a white man had ever glimpsed the Blue Ridge."

This was the place for me, and oh, so emblematic. We in the East had scientific exploration while out West they were panning for gold. This is where I wanted to turn into a masters runner, and I wanted my California boyfriend with me. I wanted him to see the difference in trails, to experience the zeitgeist of the eastern trail runner, to dabble in both the natural and cultural wonderland of southern Appalachia.

The race's Web site boasted of the usual trail-running threats—death or dismemberment, frostbite, animal bites. Sounded good to me. The entry form gave off

Printer: Insert US Air Force Marathon ad

a different kind of scent. There were dire warnings about not waiting to enter, predictions that the race would fill immediately. There was also a space to list your running cred, to prove yourself worthy of entering the race. Yes, I was back on the East Coast, in the land of selectivity and competition. If you were too laid-back about your running, or about planning, you would not be entering this race.

CROSS COUNTRY

So a plan was made: the California boyfriend would come east. We would spend a weekend in the Black Mountains, dining in nearby Asheville, one of the truly groovy towns of the United States, where dreadlocked, hemp-wearing, rainbow flag–stickered 20-somethings peacefully coexist with followers of Billy Graham, rural mountain people, reclusive artists, and ritzy tourists. We would each run our own race, the 40-miler for him, the marathon for me. We would soak romantically together in a postrace bath.

Like many of the best-laid plans, this one went, naturally, to hell.

After checking myself into the Monte Vista Hotel in downtown Black Mountain, I walked to the center at Lake Tomahawk to pick up my race packet. There hadn't been much snow or rain this year, and the lake was low and muddy. I had been in touch with the race director, and when I saw him, told him that his California ultrarunner with great credentials would not be coming. We broke up, I told him. "We were wondering," his wife confided.

I check into the hotel room the Mosquito had reserved for us. It is a family-run place of tattered elegance, faded glory. No phone, no television; it seemed perfect for us. But there is no us, there's just me, a bag of Tootsie Rolls, a two-liter bottle of diet root beer, and a mystery novel. It's just me, on my birthday, turning 40. Alone.

Enough was finally enough. At a certain point, you just know. We shared a love of running, an ability to enjoy the physical wonders of the trails and of each other. But what if one of us was injured—couldn't, or didn't, want to run anymore? Then what? What would we talk about? Our interests and habits of mind diverged. What once seemed complementary ways of seeing were in fact clashing worldviews. It worked for a summer of training. In the real world, lust in the dust is not enough.

RUNNING AS A MASTER


Race morning. I trot down the hill to the start, only to realize that I've forgotten my number. I jog back to the hotel thinking that this is not an auspicious beginning. When I get back, I am warmed up, even though it is quite chilly. Chilly but not cold, not freezing. No snow. What I know is that there is only one hill. You go up to the turnaround, and then you come back down. I am worried. I am not feeling fit. It has

been many months since I was running on the dusty California trails, months since I did training runs of 25 miles with only a few days' rest in between.

The race starts. I take it easy. I walk when I get tired. During my time in California, I learned the energetic efficiency of walking, rather than running, steep uphill. Compared with the runs I have done out west, where the terrain is higher and craggier and where there is less ambient oxygen, this does not seem all that hard. Hell, I did a race at Lake Tahoe that started at the elevation of the peak of Mount Mitchell. But still, I walk. I do not want to feel bad. I chat with the other runners. I try to relax into the race. At times, I slip into thinking about my life: 40 years old, divorced, no boyfriend, no job—having already given up two careers—and now struggling to make a living as a writer. I'm a loser.

The trail is beautiful—lush, rich, varied. I am on my own. I am 40. Halfway through the race, we turn and head back down the mountain. Now I am flying. I pass a guy and he gasps. “Where did you learn to run downhill like that?”

I shout back at him: “California. I learned in California.”

My summer did me good. I became a stronger, tougher runner. I explored places I didn't know existed. I experienced the joy of doing something you love with someone who loves it too, mingling physical pleasures and athletic pain. Maybe it was asking too much for that bond to be enough to make us love one another. Maybe, sometimes, relationships can be like races: discrete moments in time that you capture, experience, enjoy, remember, and move on. I crossed the line that day after my 40th birthday not only as the first masters woman but as the first woman. It seemed a good way to begin middle age without feeling like a loser. Alone,  but satisfied, I went back to my hotel room.