tough as nails

ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY THROUGH WEST POINT

Gail O'Sullivan Dwyer

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TOUGH AS NAILS

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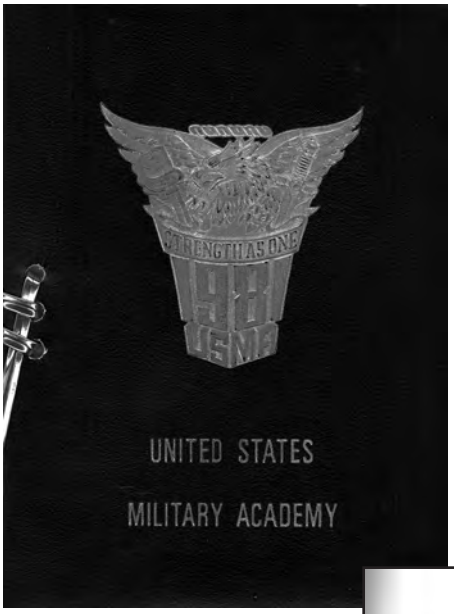

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Graduation ceremony program,
West Point Class of 1981

To the Long Gray Line and the families that sustain it…

E'er may that line of gray
Increase from day to day;
Live, serve, and die, we pray,
West Point for thee…

contents

Alma Mater

Hail, Alma Mater, dear!
To us be ever near.
Help us thy motto bear
thru' all the years.
Let Duty be well performed,
Honor be e'er untarn'd,
Country be ever armed,
West Point, by thee!

Guide us, thine own, aright,
Teach us by day, by night,
To keep thine honor bright,
For thee to fight.
When we depart from thee,
Serving on Land or sea,
May we still loyal be,
West Point to thee!

And when our work is done,
Our course on earth is run,
May it be said, "Well done,
Be thou at peace."
E'er may that line of gray
Increase from day to day;
Live, serve, and die, we pray,
West Point, for thee!

-Paul S. Reinecke

(Text amendments for gender inclusion made in June 2008)

author's note

My mother used to say, "Honey, if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all."

If I didn't have anything nice to say and it wasn't important to the story, I didn't say it. If I didn't have anything nice to say and it made the story what it was, then I changed the name. If you're reading this and think you might be a character whose name was changed, maybe you should consider not doing things that aren't nice.

The conversations cited are not verbatim, but were composed from memory based upon the situation.

All other parts of this story are as I remember them, as I perceived them.

There are women who have gone to West Point who did not have positive experiences and I regret that. I only wish all had a story such as mine.

One final thought: I didn't do anything; I realize that. I was offered an opportunity to be a part of history; I took it. We all have a story. I just wrote mine down.

This is my story.

prologue

My husband was naked when we met. Or so he says.

He tells the story more than I care to hear and I always interrupt, scoff, deny, rebut. But, I think people really believe him. People just like to believe weird stuff. That's why they buy magazines with stories of aliens and Elvis on Maui.

He didn't have a shirt on. I'll give him that. He was sitting on his bed in his barracks room at West Point, playing a guitar and the guitar covered his lap, which covered his major male body part. It was that kind of hot that suffocates everything except the New York gnats. The barracks weren't air conditioned. We didn't even have fans.

We were both cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point. It was the summer before his senior year and my junior year. He was in the Class of 1980, the first class that admitted women, and I was a member of the Class of 1981, the second class with women. (We all knew we weren't nearly as important as the first.)

I'd met his roommate earlier in the day and that's who I was looking for. Instead, I found this guy, sitting on his bed playing the guitar without a shirt on. I thought to myself: The last thing I'd do on a stifling, miserable day is play the guitar naked on my bed. Then I thought something else to myself: The *other* last thing I'd do is be attracted to a guy who played the guitar naked on his bed.

So, the weird part of this story is that we've been married now for over twenty-eight years.

There are people who ask me, "How could you not see that he was naked?"

These people don't know me well. I miss stuff like that all the time. I live in my own little world, oblivious to realities that don't match my perceptions. Where I came from, naked men didn't sit on beds playing the guitar. Where I came from, naked men didn't sit anywhere. There weren't any

Gail O'Sullivan at 8 months. Bonnet later replaced by grey mailman hat. Sept. 1959

naked men where I came from. If I'd said the word "penis" in front of my mother, she'd have had a heart attack and died on the spot. So why would I expect there to be one, a bare one, beneath that guitar? I didn't. I didn't see a naked guy on that bed; I saw a guy with gym shorts on.

Don't we all see what we want to see, how we want to see it? When I left Braintree, Massachusetts in July of 1977 to go to West Point, I saw an opportunity. It was an opportunity that I didn't rightfully deserve, but just because I happened to be at the right place at the right time in history, it was given to me. It was a gift. And I accepted the gift the way I was brought up, politely, apologetically, trying to prove that I deserved it. Sure, I saw bitterness and I saw injustice. I accepted this, too, the way I was brought up, patiently, gently, feeling bad about it. I saw myself breaking down the walls of prejudice one brick, one cadet, one instructor, one old grad at a time. That's what I saw. That's all I saw.

Sometimes I missed stuff that was standing smack dab in front of my eyes because I was too busy earning that gift, too busy fulfilling dreams. Sometimes seeing what you want to see isn't such a bad idea. If I'd seen that penis under the guitar, I'd have crawled out of that room and away from that guy, away from the road I've been on for the past thirty years. Sometimes, when you miss stuff, you have the best time of all.

Gail in 3rd grade

one

Impossible Dreams

I felt like I was waiting in line for the roller coaster at Paragon Park. If I did roller coasters, that is. I don't even do Ferris wheels. But, if I did, I would have that same belly-lurching, I'm-going-to-throw-up sensation that overtook me that April morning in fifth grade. I wanted to do it, but was scared to death.

Nuns could do that to you. I'd never said more than boo, a hushed "Good morning, Sister" to a nun before. We didn't talk to nuns. We didn't even look at them. Eye contact only meant trouble; conversation was never good.

And there I was: Eleven years old, long brown braids tied with navy blue ribbons that matched my navy blue jumper with SFA embroidered on the front right pocket. I was waiting to initiate a real conversation with Sister Agnesca, the strictest, meanest nun at St. Francis of Assisi Grammar School. Armed only with her stare, she could have convinced Charles Manson to join the Peace Corps.

The bell rang. It was a manual bell, brass with a black handle, rung in the hallway by a chosen eighth grader, every forty-five minutes, then placed back on the tile floor between the seventh and eighth grade classrooms. The other fifth graders filed out of the classroom by rows. The desks in Sister Agnesca's class never moved: Four rows of ten desks, lined up neatly in formation. I got up slowly from my desk, fighting back the impulse to just follow my best friend Sharon Preziosi right down the aisle and into the hallway. I wanted to tell this woman, this ancient nun who stopped class when the

clock struck the hour, in the middle of the lesson, no matter what it was, and sang a blessing to thank God for the new hour.

I walked up to her slowly as she erased the board. I touched the rope belt that hung down the creases of the long black habit. I gave the rope a slight yank. I couldn't see much of her face. Nuns traveled incognito. We wondered what they wore for pajamas but the thought was so not pretty, we didn't wonder long. I looked up at two pink, pocked cheeks and a long scaly nose. Her entire forehead was covered by the big white triangle in the black flowing headpiece. Her upper face was hidden by big, black-rimmed, mannish glasses.

She responded to my yank.

"Yes, Gail?" Was there concern in those little blue eyes?

Concern or no concern, I stood petrified, frozen in place.

She waited. But I knew I didn't have long before her patience was history. The pressure was on; I had to thaw out and say something fast. I did.

"Sister, my brother is going to West Point."

She cocked her head. She didn't say a word, waiting for me to continue. I did have more to say, but it was stuck.

Sister Agnesca finally responded, "Well, that's just wonderful, Gail."

It unstuck and I burped it up. It came out sounding determined, I thought.

"And I'm going to go there too some day!"

After I said it, I cringed with embarrassment. My eyes watered, like they do when I'm sinking in deep emotions. I couldn't believe I said it.

And I couldn't believe Sister Agnesca smiled. She was not what we'd call a "smiler." Her arthritic hands moved to her hips. She leaned down towards me. We locked eyes. She nodded her head so her black headpiece bounced up and down softly and then, she spoke calmly, like I had said nothing to surprise her, "You know, Gail, I do believe you will."

She said I could do it.

The year was 1969, six years before Congress voted to allow women to attend the service academies.

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"Two roads diverged in woods,
and I took the one less traveled by.
And that has made all the difference."

— Robert Frost

Ignore me and I'm yours. I don't know why this is true. Some people crave attention; I'm a non-attention craver and always have been. I seek out those who don't give me the time of day. I crave to be loved by those who ignore me best. It may be a result of genetics. My mother loved to be loved; my father didn't know how. Merge the two and out I came, idolizing people who don't know I'm alive.

Author with her brother, Paul, West Point Class of 1974, at an Army football game in 1978

My brother Paul is eight years older than I. He knew I was alive. We sat at the same dinner table and he had to have noticed me there, but I'm not sure if he could have picked me out in a police lineup. I'm not seeing a therapist because of this, just stating a fact. When he was in high school, and I was in grammar school, he couldn't have told you what grade I was in, what my favorite dessert was, what my worst subject was. If he did ask, I doubt he would have made the connection. It was brownies, no nuts, just like his; it was math, just like his.

This arrangement worked out well for me, the non-attention craver. If Paul had sat with me and played Monopoly, I wouldn't have this story to tell.

I was a little groupie in pig-tails. I sat through all his high school gymnastics meets, closing my eyes as he vaulted over the horse and whispering prayers as he flipped handsprings on the mat. When I heard him at home coming down from his bedroom, taking the stairs three at a time, and opening the front door to sky out of the house, I'd charge to the door, pleading, "Where are you going? Huh? Huh? Can I come?"

And my idol always shouted back to me, "Crazy! No!" Then he shut the white wooden front door, leaving me behind.

If he'd let me go with him then, would I have still felt so compelled to follow him years later?

I wasn't even fazed by Paul's inattentiveness. When he was accepted to the United States Military Academy Preparatory School, I bragged about him to anyone who would listen. I had no idea what this place called the prep school was, but such details were irrelevant. The excitement in my parents' voices meant this was a very big deal. I figured it had to be an honor. I popped with pride.

I didn't find out what the U. S. Military Academy Preparatory School—USMAPS or Prep School—was all about until I was in high school myself. A year of intensive math and English study only offered to those candidates whose academic background is considered weak, being offered the prep school is like telling a guy you'll go out with him if he goes to dancing school first. If the prepster, referred to as a cadet candidate, survives the academic rigors of the year, he is offered a slot in the next year's class at West Point. Paul survived his prep school year and was accepted as a member of West Point's Class of 1974.

The first day that a new cadet reports to the United States Military Academy is called R-Day, short for Reception Day. My first visit to West Point was on Paul's R-Day in July 1970. It was boiling hot. My mother made me and my younger brother, Fred, wear matching red, white and blue outfits. (Fred's real name was Gerard, but only my mother called him that. When she brought him home from the hospital, my older brothers decided he looked like Fred Flintstone and the name stuck, with everyone except my mother because that's what a mother does—she calls you by your real name.)

Despite my fascination with West Point and adoration of my brother Paul, I really wanted to stay at the hotel and swim in the pool, a real treat for us. Back home, we normally swam at Sunset Lake, freezing water, zillions of kids and rocks and broken glass. But the overbearing heat was a distant second to my feelings toward those white polyester shirts with the flag-like trim and the red shorts. I was mortified. I was going into sixth grade, way too old to be dressed up like my little brother. I was so mad at my mother that all other events of the day were inconsequential.

Driving Paul to West Point in our white Dodge Colt station wagon was a family vacation for us. We didn't do vacations. We didn't stay in hotels, ever. When we went out to eat, it was a very big deal. Every blue moon, we drove to the Five Corners (only in Massachusetts would five main streets come to-

gether at a vertex with only a blinking yellow light to order the chaos) and piled out of the parking lot at the Chinese restaurant. Fred and I shared the pu-pu platter, while my parents ordered their Manhattans and beef chop suey. My father always commented on the cats in the alley behind the restaurant, implying that we were eating their relatives, which didn't do much for my appetite. This was a rare occasion, though. Going out to eat was an extravagance for my depression-era parents; we ate at home.

Luigi's Restaurant in Highland Falls, just beyond the gates of West Point, wasn't much different than eating at home. On the main street of this tired town that looked like it should have had a coal mine supporting it, the restaurant was right off the set of Andy Griffith. Round tables with wooden chairs and family-style dining. Where's Aunt Bea? Still, for us, it was eating out, so a rather big deal.

The night before Paul's R-Day: his last family dinner until Christmas, eating out in a restaurant, a momentous occasion, calling for momentous conversation. I waited for my father to tell his son how proud he was, how he was sure Paul would succeed. I thought my mother might even get emotional, maybe a bit weepy, at her all-grown-up son, leaving to serve God and Nation. Funny, but the only words of wisdom spoken came from my mother when she warned my little brother, "Don't lean back on the chair, Gerard."

As with most of life's words of wisdom, her instructions went unheeded. The chair flew back with my nine-year-old brother in it, crashing to the floor. It was a riot. Paul and I cracked up; my parents didn't. I liked sharing this with Paul, even at the expense of Fred's head which did hit the floor pretty hard.

Don't lean back on the chair, Gerard: Advice for life from parents who care.

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We never really talked in our family. The children listened, the adults talked, more to each other, than to us. I was a great eavesdropper. My mother called me "Miss Nosey Britches," and I never missed a conversation that concerned Paul and West Point. I picked up pieces here and there, the quiet observer, the family spy, and concocted an image of West Point in my mind. It was this really neat place and, if you went there, people were very impressed.

West Point was only four hours from our home in Massachusetts and we visited whenever my parents had a good excuse and there was no cards on Saturday night. My parents rotated once a month with the telephone crowd: the Hanlons, Flahertys, McCloskeys, McGowans, and Boyles. The men had all been friends since after the Big One, WW II. They all worked together

for New England Tel & Tel, first as linemen or repairing phones, later working their way up to decent supervisory positions, two cars, suburbia, a double-wide down on the Cape. Cards meant Budweisers, Manhattans, ruffles and French onion soup dip, though occasionally the hostess would come up with something original, usually on Ritz crackers, and my mother would come home with a recipe, scrawled on the back of a piece of scrap paper she had folded neatly and placed in her huge pocketbook.

Paul just wanted to be James Bond. Or James West, from "The Wild, Wild West," a '60s TV show in which suave James always got the bad guy and the va-va-va-voom girl. You never see either of those James's calling their mother. When Paul was a cadet, we never heard from him. He didn't call home to whine, to complain, to beg us to come visit him. When he did call—always collect on a Sunday afternoon—my parents had to dig deep to find out what was going on his life. When you got off the phone with Paul, you wondered what did he just say. Paul was born with the ability to converse without revealing his feelings. Perhaps the visits to West Point were to assure my parents that all was well….Or maybe, they were a just a good excuse to party.

Tailgates were card nights in parking lots. With my brother a cadet, the gang had the perfect excuse to throw tailgate extravaganzas, parties held between Impalas and Dodge Colts, where coolers and card tables loped out from the car trunks. Even the kids got to go. We drank Fanta orange and ate cold roast beef subs and stared at the cadets, who to me were all so god-like, so handsome, and magnetic, strong and polite. I loved the uniforms. I loved the parades. Our visits were on autumn football weekends, with the scenery right out of a tourist pamphlet, and the air crisp. In the sixth grade, I was sold.

Then, about two years after my first tailgate, there was talk in the news about allowing women to attend the service academies. I should have been thrilled. I should have been jumping up and down for joy. But, as a pre-adolescent, heavily influenced by the opinions of those whom I loved and tried so hard to please, I wasn't particularly thrilled or ecstatic.

I was wishy-washy.

Opening West Point up to women would ruin the place, said my father and brother, the two main men in my life. They said this with feeling! All would be lost. So much tradition down the drain! I heard their arguments. I felt their pain. I loved West Point, but for the good of the Academy, despite my own longing to be a part of it, I found myself agreeing with my father and brother. Women should not go there.

I was a letter writer at an early age. Sister Dorothea, the liberal nun who first wore a green checkered suit instead of the long black habit, and went by

her real name instead of the long-assigned nun name, taught us in fourth grade that we could change the world by writing letters. (She also said there was no Noah, no ark; this sent the parents into a tizzy.) I worried as I heard my father and brother bemoaning their fears that West Point would be ruined by the admittance of women. So, using my best Palmer Penmanship, I wrote a letter to President Nixon. Don't let women into West Point, I wrote. You'll ruin the place. You'll spoil the aura. Open a separate academy just for women somewhere else.

For whatever reasons—growing up in a house of boys, spending the day in a Catholic school, not participating in organized sports, or perhaps simply chromosomal make-up—I was not very assertive. I was a people pleaser. It's why I was put on this earth. People pleasers worry that if they are assertive, people may not be pleased. So, people pleasers back off. People pleasers usually get walked on. People pleasers tend toward wishy-washiness and that's where I was. I wanted to be a part of West Point, but I wasn't sure if women should be there. When Congress voted to allow women into the service academies, I wanted to be a cadet. I wanted it a lot.

I needed to hear what Paul thought. (This sounds much less male-dominated than "needed Paul's approval.") On a Saturday afternoon in February in 1976, my father dialed Ft. Rucker, Alabama. Paul had graduated from West Point, had applied to and was selected for flight school, and was at Ft. Rucker learning how to fly helicopters. All this meant as much to me as prep school had meant seven years earlier. I asked Paul what he thought about Congress's decision. He responded without skipping an Airborne Ranger Infantry Cobra pilot heartbeat, "Women shouldn't go there."

After I hung up, my father asked me what Paul had to say. I told him, "He said women shouldn't go there and I think he's right. I can't apply on principle, Dad."

My father was hard to figure out. I never really tried. I never really talked to him. He had narcolepsy and was asleep most of my childhood. When he was awake, he was either working or emulating Archie Bunker from the TV show, "All in the Family." I knew he loved me, but we never said the love word, so I *guessed* he loved me. I knew he was proud of me, though he never really told me, so I *guessed* he was proud of me. I didn't expect emotion from my father; it was like we excused him from showing emotion because he himself came from such a screwy family. In Webster's, next to "eccentric" is a picture of my father's father, whom I barely remember, the infamous J. J. O'Sullivan.

J. J. wore a beanie on his Gentile head in all the family home movies, while shaking his middle finger at the camera woman, my poor mother. My grandfather made my dad look like Ward Cleaver.

I don't know what my father was thinking when I relayed Paul's advice to him. It must have been a kaleidoscope of events and feelings from his own life: his pride in Paul's accomplishments; the value he placed on being a West Point graduate; his own college degree earned through night school classes, thirty years after he'd finished high school; the tuition he'd have to pay if I went to Holy Cross; my face, sitting on the bleachers, watching a parade of cadets march by; my mother's disappointment—still—at her own father refusing to pay the $15/month tuition at Northeastern in 1939 and instead, forcing her to go to secretarial school.

I was surprised that afternoon in February 1976, when my father said, "Don't go anywhere. I'm calling your brother back."

I heard him on the phone. "Listen, Paul, I know what you're thinking. But they're going to let women in, and when they do, they should have good women in there."

When I got on the phone, that's what Paul told me. Might as well apply, he said, and see what happens. If you don't, he said, you'll miss this opportunity that others will be given.

And so I began the application process.

two

The Admissions Process

"West Point seeks a class composition of top scholars, leaders, athletes, soldiers, women and minorities to maintain a diversified collegiate environment and corps."

— USMA Admissions Catalog, 2008-2009

In 1975, President Ford signed the law that allowed women to attend the United States Military, Naval, Air Force, and Coast Guard Academies. I applied only to the Military Academy at West Point because I was eighteen years old and I knew *everything*.

I was afraid of heights and had no desire to be above the ground in anything except a very short tree. Besides, I didn't get out of Boston's South Shore much, and Colorado might as well have been in China. That ruled out the Air Force Academy. It was too far away from Massachusetts, no Red Sox games, no Bruins, no front page photos of Ted Kennedy's latest jowl. Since the Naval Academy meant ships and I preferred to deal with the ocean while covered with baby oil reading a book on a beach chair, I ruled out Annapolis as well. I didn't know anything about the Coast Guard Academy and had no inclination to fill that knowledge gap.

The large gray envelopes from the West Point Admissions Directorate came in the mail, through the brass opening in the front door, and landed

with a thud on the worn carpet. My mother placed them on the kitchen table, separating them from the bills and Sears Roebucks ads.

"They're addressed to me," I insisted, like an adolescent brat, "Don't open them!" There were piles of applications and requirements. My mother steamed over my stubbornness. I wouldn't let her even proofread.

If you want to go to West Point, you need to follow *The Plan*. *The Plan* is simple: Through all four years of high school, get mostly As, some scattered Bs. Be involved in a variety of clubs, be a leader, a president in these extracurricular activities. Play sports, varsity only; junior varsity won't cut it; and be team captain of at least one sport, more than one is best. Visit old folks at nursing homes. Give out donuts at blood drives. Build houses for humanity. Be an Eagle Scout.

The Whole Man concept applied to the admissions process before the academy was forced to accept Whole Women as well, back when "men were men and dinosaurs roamed the plains"—an old corps saying for "Before Women." The Whole Man concept meant well-rounded; they wanted academics, leadership potential and athletics. I got worried.

I didn't follow *The Plan*. I didn't even know there was one out there. I did get Sister Agnesca's vote of confidence, and that was nice, but when I read the pamphlets and saw the statistics of the incoming classes, I wished I'd known about that *Plan*.

Academically, I thought I might make the cut. I was a nerd. I was happiest sitting at a desk overflowing with reams of hand-written notes, meticulously taken in different colored pens, with underlines, little stars or flowers in the margin noting which line is more important, which phrases are testable material. I had color-coded systems for notebooks and book covers. I think I just came out of the womb this way, though it must skip a generation as God knows my kids don't have it. Due to my nerdiness, I had the grades that West Point wanted to see on those high school transcripts. So academically, it was looking OK, but, the other two categories, leadership potential and athletics were, on a good day, weak. Very weak.

I knew I should have joined Brownies in third grade. Would it help, I wondered, if I was on the math team, oratory club, English academy, National Honor Society and school newspaper? Note "on the," as in member, participant, attendee. I wasn't even in a leadership position on the math team whose members could be counted on a mitten. Actually, I was a pretty good follower. A good hard worker who neither made waves nor rocked the boat. I just paddled away, not even checking the direction I was heading, but working hard to get there.

I saw my dream fading. Why hadn't I read about the admissions criteria earlier? I could have at least tried to do something. Or maybe not. Go through fourteen years of life as a non-assertive follower and then just, bam, run for class president? I had as much leadership ability as a spring lamb in a herd of sheep.

I was initially hopeful about athletics since I really was a tomboy growing up. My favorite cut-off shorts were turquoise with a baseball patch ironed on to the behind pocket. I stayed in the house on Saturday afternoons to watch the Red Sox on Channel 38. I kept baseball cards alphabetically arranged in a green and yellow tin recipe container my mother gave me and I knew the birthdays and hometowns of every player by heart. Still, I wait for the '67 Red Sox to be a category in "Jeopardy" so I can showcase my wealth of knowledge.

Sadly, I was a wanna-be. I couldn't throw a ball across my bedroom. Nor catch it, nor hit it, but throwing was the biggest problem. I never learned how you hold a ball, how you wind that arm up, how you follow through with your wrist. I grasped the ball awkwardly, hoisted my arm up somewhere I had no idea where, and sort of flung the ball, hoping to initiate forward motion. Neon lights flashed above me and the loud speaker announced so the world could hear, "GIRL THROWING BALL! GIRL THROWING BALL!"

It was different back then. When all the mothers were housewives, life was less officially organized. Mothers were home drinking Sanka with real half-and-half and smoking Winstons at the kitchen table when we walked in the door after school. No soccer practices, no travel softball teams, no spe-

Gail (*right*), 10, shares a joke with a friend. 1969

cial tutoring. There weren't even vans back then. The mothers sat; the kids grabbed a Devil Dog or Yodel, then darted outside to play loose games, spur of the moment, make up your own rules games.

So the games I'd learned as a kid (Hit the Bat, Flashlight Tag, Four Square,etc.) were not the organized sports that would have helped me get into West Point. I skated on the frozen pond at the swamp in the woods. After dinner on Wednesday nights, I took gymnastic lessons in a dusty room, an over-sized closet really, behind the Knights of Columbus hall. When I entered high school, if balls were required, I backed off. (Some people would say I'm still that way today.)

I found something totally ball-less to do. I became a cheerleader. I was an unlikely cheerleader. I wasn't bubbly, buxom, or cute. There wasn't an effervescent bone in my body. Though I don't often admit this: I really didn't care if the team won or lost. I was usually so cold; I just wanted it to be over, one way or the other. But, according to the gobs of information that admissions had sent, cheerleading was a sport! HA! As far as athleticism goes, I knew that cheerleaders sweated less than the harried women in the snack bar, but I wasn't going to tell. Except when we did a jump or cartwheel, which wasn't very often, we probably expended the same amount of calories as those hot chocolate makers. I earned two varsity cheerleading letters for football and three for hockey. Yes, Hockey. (In a skirt, it's *cold* in those rinks.) In the aisle between the first row of seats and the rink, there isn't even room for cartwheels. We banged on the glass.

When I filled out the application forms for West Point, and circled with my number two pencil, *five* varsity letters, I had never been challenged physically in my life. I had two serious shortfalls: leadership potential and athletics. I had backed myself into somewhat of a loser corner and now I had no choice. I *had* to do well on the two big tests West Point required its applicants to take, the SAT and the Physical Aptitude Exam (PAE), now called the Cadet Fitness Assessment or CFA, or else I'd be looking for a car pool to the closest state college.

You could live in Podunk, Montana. You could travel an hour on a bus through nowhere to arrive at the high school, which housed four counties. You could be number one in your class of sixteen students, most of whose parents are married to their cousins. Enter the SAT. West Point uses these standardized tests to make sure "Mr. Podunk," despite that 4.5 GPA, will make it through his plebe year at West Point. My SATs were slightly over six hundred in each, the same score on each test, a statement to the world that I worked equally hard in every subject but showed no innate genius in any one area.

You could earn five varsity letters. You could do a perfect cartwheel and get your crotch about an inch off the ground in a split. You could clap your hands and stamp your feet at the same time and be co-captain of the football cheerleading squad. Enter the Physical Aptitude Exam (PAE). Think of it as an SAT for the biceps and hamstrings, both of which had enjoyed a life-long nap in my body. I was not excited about taking this test.

There used to be four events in the test: the flexed arm hang, a kneeling basketball throw, a standing broad jump, and a 300-yard shuttle run. I practiced. Sharon, my best friend since second grade, walked down to the high school track after school with me, armed with a stopwatch and a basketball. She also had an apple. She ate the apple while I practiced for the test. I'm still not sure why.

If I passed this test, it would rank up there with "The Feeding of Thousands with a Loaf of Bread" miracle.

Test day was a blistery, cold January Sunday afternoon. It encapsulated the four-year West Point experience. My parents dropped me off. They were not allowed to watch. I was the only female among forty-four males. The boys stared and gawked and didn't know what to make of me. Immediately, I had a crush on a muscular, brown-haired guy with a great smile, in a blue and white gut shirt. I had a thing for gut shirts. We were paired up together on the shuttle run. I saw him only at the start and he could have showered by the time I finished. I bombed the test.

Paul's roommate's brother worked at the Pentagon in a job that was somehow involved with the integration of women at the service academies. My dad called him and told him my results. He told my father that I didn't set any Academy records and that if I did get in to West Point, I would probably survive academically, but athletically, I'd be in trouble. No longer was I hearing only votes of confidence about this great West Point idea that I had. I didn't know if I'd get in. If I did get in, no one seemed to think I could finish.

I wanted Sister Agnesca back.

"The training on the athletic field which produces…the attributes of fortitude, self-control, resolution, courage, mental ability, and of course, physical development, is one completely fundamental to an efficient soldiery."

— General Douglas MacArthur

Nearly every Saturday, Josie got her mother's lime green Pinto with the fake wooden paneling down the side and drove Sharon, Kim and me to the South Shore Plaza. We would wander through Filene's and Jordan Marsh's and then wait in the line that snaked out the front door of Brigham's Ice Cream Shoppe and around the corner to the tobacco store. When we got our booth, we all would order the Brigham's Special: $1.21 for a hamburger, fries and Tab. We'd always leave the plaza to make the 4:00 pm mass before the Gospel so the mass would count. After the Gospel, the nuns told us, was too late. You'd have to go to another mass later. Going to mass was like shaving your legs. You did it without thinking because you had to.

But on the second Saturday in February, when snow crunched under your boots and the sky remained a steady somber grey, I sat on the couch under the red and white afghan my Aunt Alice had knitted, reading *Stranger in a Strange Land* for Mr. Loughmann's English class. Josie was in Vermont visiting her old Aunt Tiny; Sharon was working at the plaza shoe store; Kim was baby-sitting. Thump at the door. My mother picked the mail up off the floor. She tilted her head, which she did sometimes when she was thinking, then looked over at me. "Something from West Point," she said. It was big and gray. I jumped up. *Would they spend all that money for postage if it were a rejection?*

My mother was a hugger. My father was not. But he was emotional. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. He congratulated me, but then he paused, hesitating. Waiting. Like he had something crucial to say. I looked up at him. He picked up one of the information pamphlets that came in the grey packet and he glanced at the photo, a serious-looking cadet wearing a green helmet, beads of sweat shining over green painted cheeks, carrying a big black gun, in the woods. My father sighed. My father was not a sigher. My father was a "burst out with his thoughts" kind of guy; a "let my mother pick up the pieces later" kind of dad. This sigh meant he must have been reading parenting magazines. Finally, he put the photo of Patton, Jr. on the table, then asked me, "Honey, do you think you should start running or something?"

Poor Dad. He would always be baffled by the female psyche, and be very content to not go there. Not enough warmth in his childhood or something. He didn't know how to deal with this eighteen-year-old cheerleader. Can you blame him? What a parenting dilemma: do you encourage a child to do something that you know is really, really, really hard, something that you're confident she cannot do, something you're sure she'll fail at?

My father didn't know the answer. He didn't know what to think, what to do that February afternoon. He spent the next four years that way.

I told him sure, not to worry, I'd start running.

I spent two months buying cute T-shirts, matching socks and hair ribbons. When April hit, I jogged with Arthur, a friend who lived four doors up who wanted to make the summer basketball league team. He was 6'6" and I was 5'3"—Mutt and Jeff, jogging down Washington Street, past Richmond's Hardware and Henry's Pub, around Tremont Street, the double-decker houses and Venuti's Funeral Home, then back to the top of Robinson Avenue, three of the longest miles I'd ever seen in my life. Anyway, I was more concerned about looking cute in my matching outfits than getting in shape.

Later in life, my mother got cancer. She didn't seem to want to know the facts of her illness. I couldn't understand why. She knew: Sometimes being clueless makes it easier to go to hard places.

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Four Eggheads from my high school were going to West Point. All the incoming freshmen at Archies took a diagnostic test and thirty of us, based upon the results of that test, were put in one homeroom, took advanced math and science classes together and were officially called "Eggheads." Four of us—Patty Mahoney, Jimmy McConville, Mike McGrath and me—out of a graduating class of 206 from our high school received appointments to West Point. That's a lot.

I wasn't sure what I felt about these classmates of mine joining me on my big adventure. Their company meant less glory for me! Mike was captain of the football team, one of six McGrath boys with an older brother at Norwich. He was reserved and quiet, not a conversation initiator, and since I wasn't either, we'd never said boo to each other. Jimmy was funny, almost a wise-guy, really smart, full of potential, not so full of effort. Both Jimmy and Mike were from Quincy—one town over—and I didn't know either of them well enough to decide what I thought about them at West Point. I didn't care really; I figured they'd be fine. It was me I was worried about.

Patty surprised me the most. I'd known her since half-day kindergarten at Monatiquot Elementary School. We hung out in different crowds; she was more sociable than I was, though some trees were, too. She attracted boys like I attracted pimples. She was too normal to want to go to West Point. I didn't get why she wanted to go. For some reason, it was OK for me to want to go, but not for *normal* girls.

Mr. Mahoney drove Patty and me in their Ford station wagon to visit West Point on a bright and warm April Saturday. He'd called Admissions and set up a short tour since Patty had never visited, and I really only knew

how to do tailgates at Buffalo Soldier Field and football games at Michie Stadium. It was weird being at West Point not as a little sister. I was a pre-candidate, not there visiting someone else; I was there for me. I was excited to the point of nausea; I wanted to tell everyone that I was going to be a cadet next year. *Oh, please!*

We stood near a towering statue of Eisenhower and met Billy, blue eyed, handsome, blond, and kind. He was the head rabble-rouser, the West Point lingo for cheerleader and the admissions officer had arranged for him to show us around for a few hours. I'd never thought about being a cheerleader at West Point, though way back, hidden in the vanity closet of my mind, was the notion that being a college cheerleader would surpass all self-expectations of coolness. Billy wanted to introduce us to some female cadets; there were less than a hundred of them there at this time (only sixty-two would graduate three years later), all plebes in the first class of women, the Class of 1980.

We left Mr. Mahoney with the tourists and parents and Patty and I followed Billy across an open cement area and into a grey six-story building, up five flights of grey stairs that echoed with yelling and chaos. So exciting!

"They'll be getting ready for the parade," Billy told us. "This will probably not be the best time for y'all to chat." What a great smile. Patty and I melted, too enamored to appreciate the chaos around us, too stupid to think of ourselves as ever being a part of it.

Billy knocked on a brown wood door. We heard someone yell something through the door, and he opened it for us to see that a small tornado had just touched down. Billy laughed and introduced a dark-haired girl to us as Danna. He shooed us in the room and closed the door, leaving us in the room while he stayed in the hallway. White starched belts, brass cleaner, shoe polish, rifle-cleaning rods were scattered on the beds and the desks. Two other girls, one tall redhead and one short brunette, were scurrying, doing things to each other's shirts and fiddling with the buckles and belts that draped over their shoulders. There was yelling in the hallways. The minute callers, Danna told us. It's a plebe duty, she explained. "Do you guys really want to come here?" She asked, as she grabbed her rifle off the bed. Patty and I looked at each other. She laughed. "Ok, if you do, get your haircut before you come! Don't let them cut it at the barber shop!" And then, holding her rifle in front of her, up and down, like a vertical line, she apologized for being in a rush, then charged out the door.

"Nice girl," Patty said as we joined Billy again in the hallway.

"She is," he agreed. "But it hasn't been easy."

Patty and I looked at each other. We had something in common: neither one of us could refuse a challenge. Of course, Patty will take on a challenge and somehow attract boys. When I take on a challenge, my face breaks out.

After the parade, we walked with Billy into the mess hall, where a few thousand male cadets and those hundred or so female cadets were eating lunch. Patty and I both wore '70s stuff: close-fitting skirts that flared a bit below the knee, summer blouses, harachi sandals. Long straight brown hair hung halfway down our backs, killer tans, not Playboy bunny material, but not dirt ugly either. "It won't exactly be like this when y'all get here in July," Billy smiled.

"Huh?" we asked. And that's how we left our visit. In a daze, completely enamored and totally clueless.

It was probably easier that way.

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"Eden is that old-fashioned house we dwell in everyday, without suspecting our abode, until we drive away."

— Emily Dickinson

An interesting thing happens when you want something badly, and then boom, there it is, you've got it; it's going to happen; and then, if you allow yourself to think about it, it's not as if you don't want it anymore, but it sure doesn't look as good as it did when you wanted it so badly. This is what happened with R-Day. The closer it got, the more real it got, the more worried I got, the less enticing it looked.

I had a list of "Things to Do Before West Point." Some of the things made no sense at all: a peanut buster parfait at Dairy Queen and chocolate crème puff at Valle's Steakhouse with Josie, a lot of sleep, a killer tan. Some of the things made a lot of sense: breaking in the combat boots I had to buy, getting my long straight brown hair cut for the first time in years, like that nice girl had recommended. And then there were some things that didn't make the list because I just didn't want to think about them…. like saying good bye to family and friends.

I met Kathy before Sean. I was in seventh grade and I was not an animal lover, but a gang of us were in her backyard looking at whatever she had. They were gerbils or hamsters; I still don't know which is which. I thought they looked like big rodents—their tails were particularly ugly—so I stood back from the group. Kathy was in sixth grade and was new. Her family had just moved to Braintree from California, which was like moving into the neighborhood from Mars. I didn't know she had a brother.

Sean rode his bike up the driveway, ignoring the commotion near his sister, parked it in the garage, then walked past us, up the back steps and into the house.

"Who was that?" Pamela Smith asked. I wasn't surprised. She wore make up and shorts that rode half-way up her butt. She was keeping a cool distance from the big rats, too.

It didn't take Pamela long. She and Sean were hiding together during flashlight tag before the end of the week. I followed them around like a puppy dog. They finally broke up. I continued to follow him around, but it took him two and a half years to notice. The summer before tenth grade, he asked me out.

He was going pre-med to Stonehill, a college about twenty miles away. When I'd be walking around the woods wearing green paint on my face, he'd be drinking beer at frat parties. This concerned me.

The night before I left for West Point, they threw a party for me at Sean's house. Sharon, and Kim, who waited for me every day after kindergarten, gave me a powder blue suitcase with my initials on it, and they ate too much spiked watermelon. Sean and I left the party early. I cried a lot. He knew me better than anyone; he knew Braintree was too small for me. We agreed to write and he said he'd visit with my parents the first time we were allowed to have company mid-July, but I knew it would never be the same. If he had been the one going to West Point, we could have managed this long-distance relationship. But he wasn't the one going to West Point. It was me. And I knew I'd have to cut all emotional ties to home if I had any chance at all of surviving.