

Too much is not enough: Love and ultrarunning in Telluride

Sorry, chica. Can't run this weekend.

Those two short sentences, received in a text message, raised questions. The answer presented herself a few days later when I saw Alex running with a girl. She was lean and lithe, with long, dark hair and big Disney princess eyes. She was beautiful.

Who's my replacement? I texted. But he did not respond.

Alex and I had a year-and-a-half, on-again, off-again, completely dysfunctional relationship. It was terrible and painful. And amazing and wonderful. We had broken up for good about six months before, only because I had insisted on ending it. Not because I didn't love him but because I was sick of fighting.

It had become too much.

The thing we shared in common was ultrarunning. That term refers to races that are longer than 26 miles (an ultra marathon). Some races stretch on for 100 miles and upwards of 30 hours. Testing the limits of human endurance, 200-mile races are now becoming popular. You run through the night and don't sleep, unless you count a catnap in the dirt beside the trail. One foot endlessly in front of the other. The first time I signed up for a 50-mile race, my parents asked, Don't you think that's a little too far?

Yes, of course it's too far. That's kind of the point.

Ultra running exists in most parts of the country, sure. But it has a Western soul. It's all dramatic landscapes and rugged individualism.

According to the sport's mythos, it was born in 1974 when runner Gordy Ainsleigh joined the horses on the 100-mile Western States Endurance Run through California's Sierra Nevada. Ever since, the word has been synonymous with sweeping vistas, traversing ridgelines, cutting steps into the snow on high passes, dodging lightning bolts and sweating in the heat of low elevation deserts. All in one race.

But really, ultrarunning was just a fancy word for being outside in Colorado's San Juan Mountains. Alex and I would run the trails near our home in Telluride, logging 20 or 30 miles at a time. We scrambled up the scree fields of Oscar's Pass, traipsed through wildflower-strewn Bridal Veil Basin, outran thunderstorms on Ballard Mountain and dozed in cool, grassy town parks mid-run. We soaked our sore legs in the icy San Miguel River. He was more experienced than me and he would tell me long stories and jokes and engage me in philosophical debates to take my mind off the pain in my feet or knees or lungs.

Early in our relationship he would show up at my door late at night and talk at me, my sleepy brain reeling as I tried to keep up. I felt lucky, like I alone was privy to the secret ramblings of a genius.

But it also felt like he took a crow bar and pried open my brain, climbed in and swam around in there. He churned up my frontal lobes and grey matter until he had infected every cell and I could think of only him. Nothing made sense anymore.

They say ultrarunning is a simple sport for complicated people.

After we broke up, I didn't have anyone else to go on daylong mountain adventures with so I cautiously asked if he wanted to run some weekend. He did. We did a 28-miler that weekend. And 30 miles the next. And 26 the next.

We ran the length of Last Dollar Road, slowly nudging our way through flocks of sheep. We combed through the underbrush at the top of the pass, looking for the jugs of water and Gatorade we cached there a few days earlier. We laughed like maniacs as we slipped in the clay-like mud that caked our shoes, chunks of it flying off in all directions as we ran. We extended our thumbs into the oncoming traffic of state highway 62, huge grins plastered to our faces to show drivers we weren't serial killers, but fun (albeit muddy), runners who needed a ride. Our Telluride neighbors were the second car by and they ferried us home.

I secretly longed to get back together.

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Telluride possesses a beauty that is not subtle. It is jaw-droppingly, achingly beautiful. To say it's in-your-face is an understatement. The sunsets splash such dazzling alpenglow on the hillsides it sends even longtime residents into the streets nightly to take photos. Its beauty is also horrifying. The summer rainstorms are so severe that violent red torrents of mud ruin highways. The mountains rise straight up from the valley floor, forming a towering, three-sided cul-de-sac that can leave you feeling trapped. Avalanches cascade down gullies and off cliffs at the end of the canyon, sending up gigantic, glittering clouds of snow when they hit the ground.

The strip of sky above is so narrow you can't tell which direction a storm is coming from before it's upon you.

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After I saw Alex with the mystery girl, I stopped asking him to go on runs. I still logged big days in the hills above Telluride, but by myself. It was considerably less fun alone than it was together. Every trail was haunted — tied to a memory of us.

I learned through mutual friends that the mystery girl was an old girlfriend. They had rekindled a relationship and she had moved in with him for the summer. She was in law school. I felt the sting of inferiority.

I needed a distraction and something that let me prove my worth, if even just to myself. So I signed up for the 38-mile Telluride Mountain Run. It was an ambitious goal for me, but modest by ultrarunning standards. I spent the next few weeks training non-stop and fell into bed each evening exhausted, too tired to attend to my heartache.

The day before the race, I went to pick up my registration packet. There they were. Both of them were doing the race. She might be prettier and smarter, but now we would find out if she was also a better runner.

The day of the race dawned sunny, but rain was in the forecast for the afternoon. The predictable summer mountain monsoons would up the difficulty of the race. About 75 people crowded at the starting line at the bottom of the ski resort, but my vision narrowed to the mystery girl. It was just the two of us competing out there today, as far as I was concerned. The gun went off and she bolted up the dirt service road. She quickly shot to the front of the pack. But I wasn't worried. It takes me hours to get warmed up and I figured I could reel her back in after a few miles.

I ran into the first aid station at mile 17, which was at the end of the box canyon. It was near the hulking behemoth of Paradox Mill, a rotting relic of Telluride's mining industry. I spotted her. I quickly refilled my water, stuffed a sandwich into my pack and took off in pursuit.

I worked my way up the steep and slippery drainage of Marshall Basin, grasping at the rocks on the sides of the trail. Some of them crumbled to pieces in my hands. The familiar metallic taste of too much exertion crept into the back of my throat. The air was hot and stifling. The trail was dotted with shoulder-high stinging nettles, which tore at my skin and clothing. I passed ancient, rusted ore carts and wire cables, discarded remnants of Telluride's mining past. Dark clouds gathered on the horizon and thunder rumbled in the distance. I scrambled faster, determined to overtake her before the inevitable rain came down.

And then I passed her. I probably looked crazed, with my face red, calves bleeding from the thorny bushes. But I passed her.

I was the better runner.

My internal victory celebration was soon cut short. I had begun to feel a twinge of pain on the outside of my left knee: iliotibial band syndrome. Pushing it up that last drainage had caused an old injury to flare back to life. Going uphill wasn't a problem; but in another few miles there was a long, steep descent which was sure to be excruciating. I knew the pain would slow me down so much I might not even be able to finish the race before the cut-off time, nevermind beat my adversary.

Thunder cracked overhead. A gust of wind bent the grass. I had a decision to make. There were still about 20 miles left in the race. Do I give up and let mystery girl beat me? Or do I push on through what was certainly going to be an extremely painful next few hours and maybe injure myself more seriously?

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Alex and I used to say Telluride is not the “real world.” That was meant as both a pejorative and a term of endearment. The intensity of a resort town is alluring, but not sustainable. It’s too extreme. Opposing forces push and pull, and leave you bruised. It’s the boom-and-bust tradition of the Old West, except on a predictable, yearly schedule. Mountain town tourism is the new gold mining.

The crush of the busy season leaves you sleep deprived but swimming in cash. The desolation of off-season is peaceful yet heavy with melancholy. Lights burn in every window in town during Christmas week, but hundreds of mansions stand dark and abandoned the rest of the year. The joy and camaraderie after a powder day is palpable on every bar stool in town. The gut-wrenching devastation after the death of a local in a Bear Creek avalanche even more so. Every weekend brings a music festival, skiing, a fashion show, a lip synch contest, art shows, a film festival, a running race, a street dance, parties, drugs and alcohol. It never gets old. Except that it does.

Running was our escape, a way to transcend the madness. People would ask us, What are you running from? Oh nothing, we would reply. Just all of this.

The problem was that ultrarunning with Alex was also madness. It was exhilarating. And exhausting. Its intensity was unbearable. We burnt out.

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I stopped. I sat down on a boulder and let it sink in that I was quitting the race. With tears blurring my vision, I watched as she trotted past me and into the distance. The first drops of rain came down, big and fat and soaking. I was drenched in just a few seconds. I turned around and limped back to the Imogene Pass Road, put my thumb out and hitched a ride back to town in the Jeep of an Austrian tourist.

In the morning, I scanned the race results for mystery girl’s name but didn’t see it. I looked at the bottom of the page and there it was: DNF. Did Not Finish. She had dropped out of the race too. The pain of 38 rugged Telluride miles had defeated her. I learned a few weeks later that she and Alex had broken up and she had moved back to wherever she came from.

Telluride, ultrarunning, Alex — they had been too much for her. Or maybe, like me, they hadn’t been enough.

