

# RUINING RYAN

## Pre-Princess

“When you have love, everything bad seems trivial, and everything good feels that much better because you have someone to share it with.”

The moment my father chose to impart this wisdom was particularly inopportune. At the time, I was an idealistic, pudgy sixteen-year-old kid who had never had a girlfriend. To make matters worse, this sappy quote was his pathetic attempt to explain why some strange woman was moving into our house -- just two months after he had forced Mom to move to that sad little condo down the street from my high school. I had begged my father not to move in with that woman -- at least not so *fast* -- but he somehow thought that his grandiose lecture on love and happiness would help me to understand why Betsy and her four little yapping dogs had replaced my mother in our home, seemingly overnight.

While his words did not serve to reconcile me to what I viewed as his unfathomable *betrayal*, they did touch me on a personal level. I became even more depressed, and desperate to experience love for myself. This triggered my first... exploit.

I decided, in one moment of unshakeable tenacity, that I absolutely must have a girlfriend as soon as possible. It was not that I was a typical desperately horny teenager, although that might have played a small role. What I really wanted, in that empty, aching way one wants only the most illusive ideals, was to experience the magical euphoria of a romantic relationship. I wanted a girl to hold my hand. I wanted to buy her flowers and write her sweet little notes. I wanted to touch her face and tell her she was beautiful. My role in the relationship would be to make my girl feel like

a princess. I believed that in return I would feel appreciated, attractive, and perhaps even loved. I had yearned for this for too long, and at last had decided it was time I experienced it.

Now, you must understand, when Ryan Marshall decides to do something, it undoubtedly *will* be done. Even in my innocent youth, I was ambitious to the point of obsession. Up until my father's stirring advice, I had only used this overdeveloped ambition to do well in school, since this was my sole discernable purpose in life. However, at the embarrassing age of "sweet sixteen and never been kissed," I decided to devote my passionate nature to something possibly *more fulfilling* than straight A's. Tired of being fat, friendless, and ignored, I found it utterly shocking that I had not begun this quest sooner.

I immediately began going to the gym after school every day for three hours. I lifted weights until my arms trembled, I ran on the treadmill until I thought my heart would explode, and I did crunches that left me doubled over all week. After a while, though, it became less painful, and I began to actually enjoy the high I got from physical exertion. As my weight dropped, my social standing climbed... in almost direct proportion! By the end of my sophomore year, I had lost eighteen pounds and gained at least eighteen rungs on the high-school social ladder.

You might wonder why it never bothered me that my emerging popularity was completely superficial. To be honest, I did not really consider this to be an issue. In high school, everything is superficial. The delicate web of a teenager's social status is a flimsy conglomeration of guidelines. In order to reach the center of the web, every adolescent must be able to spin each intricate layer according to the ideal prototype, or he will never find his way into the inner circle. Having the right clothes, a wealthy family, and a sharp wit will only get you so far. Although these had allowed me to cling to some outer edge of the web for several years, I knew that the inner layers could not withstand my weight. As I began to shed pounds, it only made sense that I could spin with newfound agility. Suddenly my peers began to notice my personality, and my consequent satisfaction was beyond the superficial. Rather than see my experience as proof that my classmates were small-minded and shallow, I remained relentlessly optimistic. Before exploring the depth of another person, one must first wade through the shallow waters.

As it turned out, the person inside the timid little butterball was witty, generous, willful, and a magnet of charisma. By the time summer rolled around, I was popular, healthy, and increasingly confident. My

transformation had earned me a front-page seat in the high school gossip chronicles. Everyone knew my name, and suddenly began to recognize some of my previously irrelevant positive attributes. No one cares that you are kind when you are deemed too dorky for social interaction. No one knows that you are witty when you are too shy to say what's on your mind. No one notices that you have soulful green eyes and a genuine smile when you are seventy pounds overweight.

My stabilized ego gave me the courage to become more involved in the school activities I had always loved, but never led. I ran for student government, and was voted next year's Treasurer of my class. I joined the track team, effectively turning my exercise obsession into a group of friends. I could not wait for next year when I would audition for the fall play, *Guys and Dolls*. Theater had always been my niche, and the few friends I had were some fellow chorus members from Harrison High School's production of *Once Upon a Mattress* during my freshman year. If I could use my new confidence to secure a lead in *Guys and Dolls*, though, I would no longer be a mere theater nerd. I would be the theater nerd who all the other theater nerds wanted to be. Starring in a show meant that you got *noticed*, and, if you'll recall, this was my goal from the start. Having an active social life was a pleasant windfall, but even among multitudes of friends and admirers, I never lost sight of my solitude.

Although my confidence was growing, I was still much too self-deprecating to actively pursue a beautiful girl. So, much to my chagrin, by the time my sophomore year ended, I had not achieved my goal. The summer was not the time to find a girlfriend, so I concentrated on my game plan. Although I had been making considerable progress, I realized that I was still significantly overweight. Over the summer I doubled the time I spent exercising. I began shedding pounds even more quickly.

My parents were not pleased. While they were happy that I had decided to get into better physical shape, they both insisted that I was perfect the way I was and that any girl would be lucky to have me. My mother was especially fond of this point. "Ryan, don't you know that you are the handsomest, sweetest, smartest, most wonderful boy in the whole world? I love you so, so much." These words had made me a very happy child for many years, but I was well past the age of blind trust in a mother's love. I knew that she meant what she said, and I loved her for it, but I also knew that reality was finally catching up with me. If I wanted a girlfriend, I had no choice but to lose more weight, buy better clothes, and do something that would really get me noticed.

My plan to get noticed, of course, was to be cast in a leading role for the fall musical. Between excessive workout sessions, I also began teaching

myself to match pitch. I had never had the lead in a musical before, but I knew that required *knowing how to sing*, so I concentrated my efforts at my dad's grand piano almost every day. I plunked out one note at a time, and adjusted my voice to match the sound of each note. Of course, I only did this while my father was at work. I certainly didn't need The Honorable Gerald H. Marshall, ESQ telling me that I shouldn't be wasting my time with silly songs when I could get a head start studying for my SAT's. Unfortunately, Betsy and the Yippity Quartet were always home, and a constant source of frustration.

"Ryan, do ya hafta do that so early? You're gonna wake the dogs." This was my greeting whenever I practiced any time before noon.

"Ryan, you're giving me a headache. Can't you do that some other time?" That was the afternoons.

"Ryan, stop that nonsense. Your father will be home soon, so you better help me clean up around here and get dinner ready." That, of course, was the evenings.

It's too bad my mother's condo was too small for a piano. I know she would have understood.

On July 29<sup>th</sup>, I went out to celebrate my seventeenth birthday... with my mom. This had been a tradition since before I can remember, except that all previous years it had been both of my parents who took me to dinner at Boricelli's. The owner was a jovial Italian named Ray, whose limited English vocabulary never prevented him from making us feel welcome. My birthday dinners had always filled me with warmth, a sense of belonging, and the best eggplant parmesan in the tri-state area. This year, however, even Ray's throaty chuckle and special rendition of "*Buon compleanno*" could not drag me from my vacuum of self-pity. Not only was this the first year my parents had to fight over who got to take me to Boricelli's, but this was also the first year I felt that going out with my parents was borderline pathetic. I was well past the age when I should have realized this, but my elevated social standing had driven the point home. My mom, of course, noticed my mood, but assumed I was missing Dad. "Don't worry, Ryan," she assured me over a mouthful of linguini, "we don't need Dad to have fun at Boricelli's. I'm sure between the two of us we could eat his share too!" Then she gave me that all too familiar squinty look she had been using over the past few months when preparing to remark on my weight. "And you certainly could use a little more meat on those bones. Would you like another order of the eggplant, honey?" I rolled my eyes, but declined

politely. What she did not understand was that I was still eating as much as I always had. Now, though, I was burning up so many calories at track practice and in my spare time at the gym, that I continued to lose weight despite my enormous caloric intake. People kept urging me to eat more, but I honestly do not believe that would have been humanly possible. I turned away from my mother's concerned face and smothered my sorrows in another mouthful of warm *focaccia* bread.

I began my junior year at Harrison High School in a frenzy of excitement. I knew this would be my year. The measly eighteen pounds I had lost before the school year ended was forgotten when I appeared that first day in top physical form. Overall, I had lost seventy pounds. Yeah, I know, it seems unrealistic, but perhaps now you grasp the extent of my obsessive nature. I also had convinced my father to buy me a whole new wardrobe to match my new look. No more JCPenny's button-down shirts for me! For the first day I chose a new pair of baggy khaki pants, and a chest-hugging navy blue T-shirt. As I walked down the hallway toward my locker, I could see people whispering about me... and for once it felt good! Few dared approach, but those who did were vocal enough for everyone. "Ryan Marshall?? Is that you? WOW, man, you look incredible. What did you do?" I glowed with pride as I graciously accepted compliment after compliment throughout the school day.

Only a few days into the school year, we had the auditions for *Guys and Dolls*. I was confident that my hours at the piano would secure me a leading role. I sang a song about love from the musical *Brigadoon* for my audition. I figured it would be good motivation while I was practicing over the summer, and provide me with genuine feeling behind my words for the audition. I was right. The following week, my gawky friend Tim nearly tripped over his too-long gray sweatpants while rushing toward me as I approached the Bulletin Board. "Ryan, you got it! You're Nathan Detroit! I can't believe it, I thought you couldn't sing? Well, congratulations, my friend, you're officially the lead! I'm Harry the Horse... I guess that's pretty cool, but..." Eying the crowd gathered in the hallway, I grabbed Tim by the shoulders to calm him down. I don't know how I did it, though, because I could hardly contain my own enthusiasm.