

likely, I'm sorry to say, it will be the latter. Still, the longer, more difficult path to goodness and the acceptance that comes with it has to be, I think, the ultimate goal. I'll never look like Kristin Scott Thomas (though God knows I would love to), so I guess the Venus de Milo will have to be a more realistic role model for me.

In Pursuit of What I Don't Do Well

A journalist named Karen called and asked if she could do an interview. "In your element," she said. "You pick the time and place." My element, that week, was southern Utah's San Juan River, where I was leading a beginner's whitewater rafting class. I asked her to come along.

As we floated down the gray, silty river between the mineral-stained canyon walls, the relatively easy class 2 rapids behind us, Karen got out her camera, notebook, and pen.

We talked about my life. How I've made the large chunk of land between Salt Lake City and the Grand Canyon my backyard, my temple; how I spend at least half of every year outside.

"And where do you get all your athletic ability?" Karen asked.

I laughed out loud. "I don't have any," I said. "This is all an act."

And it is true. For all the things I undertake—whitewater rafting, backpacking, rock climbing, skiing, scuba diving, tennis, kayaking, horseback riding, softball, sailing, etc.—I have not one ounce of natural ability. God gave me brains, a good

ear for language, a face that most people think they can get along with, and my mother's strong legs. Grace, finesse, timing, and all the other things that make an athlete an athlete didn't come in my package.

"You've got to give Pam credit," my athletic friends and lovers have always said about me. "She'll try just about anything." And this too is true. Year after year, season after season, I find myself guiding a raft down the country's most dangerous white water, skiing the trees next to the double-black-diamond runs, urging a horse that is way too strong over a series of jumps that are way too high, and not looking particularly graceful at any of it. I am relentless in my pursuit of what I don't do well, and I will stop at almost nothing.

Do I enjoy it? A lot of the time, mostly between outings, I think so. But in the heat of the moment I spend a lot of time making deals with the deity that governs athletic pursuits. "Please God, don't let there be an avalanche; please God, don't let my foot slip; and please God, don't let them hit the ball toward me in right field. If you just get me down off this ledge this one time I promise I will never . . ." I am not, I know, a total klutz. If I were, given the things I have tried, I'd be dead.

For my father, beauty and athletic ability are one and the same. When he looked at me as a child and saw neither, he turned his attention to other things: his business, the ball game, Chris Evert on TV. Beauty, I learned, was not something that could be attained in still life; the only true beauty was beauty in motion. Peggy Fleming dipping her lovely body toward the toe of her ice skate; Olga Korbut, weightless, mid-

cartwheel on the gymnasium floor; a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader kicking high above her feathered hair; and Chris Evert—most of all, Chris Evert—tossing, reaching, lunging toward her serve.

My father wanted me to be a tennis player more than he wanted anything in the world. A natural athlete himself, he tried to coach me. "Move your feet!" I can still hear him shout from the other side of the net. "Follow through!" It was the one thing he ever tried to teach me, the one thing we really could have shared. As with everything else, I was only marginally good at tennis. I tripped and sweated my way to my first and only trophy, handed my father my racket, and vowed never to play tennis again.

What the trophy actually signified has gotten a little hazy over the years. My father says I won first place in the country club's fourteen-and-under singles tournament. In my mother's version I was *runner-up* in the *city's* fourteen-and-under tournament. But I've carried that trophy around with me for a lot of years, and it doesn't say first place or runner-up. The words carved into the square plate underneath the arching gold figure read "Fourteen and Under: Most Improved."

If tennis were really only tennis, it would have been okay to be "most improved," but tennis was everything. It was grace, it was style, it was beauty, and at fourteen the lesson I learned was simple: Without it, I wouldn't be attractive to a man. Beauty wasn't something I wanted to be "most improved" at. And when I put down my racket "forever," it must have looked like I was admitting defeat. But in truth, I just needed a different weapon. In truth, I had not yet begun to fight.

I'm told that most women get their idea of beauty from their mothers, and I think of all the broken bones I could have saved myself (seven, not even counting ribs) had the things that made my mother beautiful been enough for me. My mother, an actress, was drop-dead gorgeous in poster-size promotion pictures that gather dust on my parents' basement walls. She tried to teach me a whole other type of beauty: what clothes to buy and how to wear them, how to put on makeup, where to part my hair. When I do all this according to her instructions, which I do about twice a year, people tell me I am beautiful, and I believe them. But this is a different kind of beauty, and because it comes too easily, because it comes at all, I don't trust my relationship to it: it feels like I am pulling off some kind of gag.

Becoming beautiful for my mother meant an hour's worth of fun at the mirror, a trip to the masquerade party, getting to be the princess on Halloween. Becoming beautiful for my father is a self-imposed sentence, an M. C. Escher drawing: the lizard eternally climbing the infinite stairs. My mother's definition of beauty is as far away as stardust; my father's as close as my heartbeat, as real as a broken bone. So in a way that now strikes me as infuriatingly predictable, I turned my young adult life into a series of athletic endeavors, mostly in the path of men who were much too handsome and astonishingly athletic: ex-skiing coaches, world-class kayakers, international rugby players.

The men I met in pursuit of my own athleticism led me to places I probably had no business being. The most stunning example of this is the three seasons I spent guiding hunters in

Alaska. Somehow I believed that climbing those mountains for eighteen and sometimes twenty hours a day, wet and cold and hungry, would make me feel beautiful in the eyes of the man I loved, the guide I shared a base camp with. It wasn't exactly tennis, but in my mind it became a new means to old ends: sweat, strength, muscle, motion. I would have a natural beauty, I thought, a beauty that would transcend no showers, no makeup, no clothes except for camouflage fatigues, no cream rinse, no earrings. And I was right. I never looked as beautiful to that man as I did near the end of those eight weeks, tanned and strong and dirty. Almost as beautiful as the next girl he would see back in civilization walking down the street.

Another man and I would go skiing. All the way up to the top: the double-black-diamonds called Jupiter Bowl. We would spend the day up there, him cutting perfectly symmetrical turns through the powder, me behind, crossing his first three, maybe four turns and then catching an edge and falling, somersaulting, plummeting, skis and poles flying in all directions, snow packing down into my face, my ski suit, my boots. And then we would go back and do it again. One day I was fifteen minutes late for the therapy this pursuit had sent me into because after nine collarbone-wrenching, knee-twisting falls I felt I had to go up the lift one more time. I guess I thought I might, against all odds, get it right, my skis cutting his turns into perfect figure eights, my arms and legs bending and lifting, shooting feathery arcs of powder behind me, my face brilliant, shining in the ice-cold sunlight: beautiful.

Would it have been possible in those days for me to fall in

love with a paunchy man, bookish and kind, who took his idea of beauty more from a Renaissance painting than from a Coors Light commercial? Not one chance in a million.

There were other men, all more or less the same, so when I met the man who would turn out to be my husband, nobody was surprised to find out that he was an African safari guide. But there was one difference. Very beautiful and athletic himself, Mike had an eye for inner beauty that can only have come from a life far away from American commercialism and pageantry. He had an appreciation for a well-cooked meal, for a quick imagination, and for movies with happy endings (he nods his head vigorously when the characters do the right thing). He thinks Sally Field is the most beautiful woman alive. When his best man told him he wanted to have a bachelor party with naked dancing girls jumping out of a cake, Mike said, "What kind of cake?"

I took Mike to Alaska to show him our version of the Kalahari—the place where I used to lead hunters, a place I have come to love and, like the Utah desert, think of as home. Another couple came along. Julia was graceful and quick, a woman who actually got more beautiful each day she didn't have a shower; her husband was a little slow and awkward, like me.

On the day we decided to climb the steep rock moraine on the side of an isolated mountain glacier, it became clear that two of us were acrophobic and two of us were not. While Mike and Julia scrambled up the moraine like mountain goats, Ted and I hung back, whining, clinging, becoming alternately angry and hysterical, putting our bodies into one awkward position after another. My acrophobia is something I confront often, and even-

tually I always make it, hand over hand, up the face of the rock.

But it is in these moments—when my fingers leave one crack and reach for the next, when my weight falls forward on my skis at the edge of the cornice, when the fast water above the rapid tugs at the nose of my boat, when the long fly ball is coming toward me—that I ask myself, *Why am I not somewhere else doing something I am good at, like writing, for instance, or taking standardized tests, or growing vegetables, or playing the piano?* And the answer is, I must believe that one day I'll get it right. One day, if I try hard enough, I'll look like a woman on the cover of *Outside* magazine, like an ABC sports-highlights cut-to-commercial still, like a poster on the wall of a bar with too many TVs. I will be frozen there in the motion of someone's memory, and that someone (a man, my father, myself) will say, "That was beautiful!"