Twitter Thread by Chris Jones



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Back in 2004, Ricky Williams, the American football player, left the Miami Dolphins after a third strike for smoking weed and disappeared. He'd had a notable career besides, but this was the capper: He said goodbye to his coach from Hawaii and vanished off the face of the Earth.

I was like, I want to be the guy who finds him. My memory is a little foggy here, but I think I got Ricky's email address from the godfather of one of Esquire's editors. It was an AOL account, I remember. I wrote Ricky and asked him if he'd talk to me if I found him.

He replied! And he said if I found him, he would tell me everything. AMAZING. But first—finding him. There were reports that he'd been in Italy, Fiji, Japan, and, most recently, Australia. A guy who'd felt trapped was now making the most of his freedom. Ricky was on THE MOVE.

I asked Peter, my editor, if I could go searching for Ricky. I didn't really think I would find him. But I figured I'd get some crazy travel out of it, giving chase. That's what I was calling the story in my head: "Chasing Ricky." I imagined I'd always be one step behind.

Peter asked me what I thought my chances were. My brain calculated, "Less than one tenth of one percent." My mouth said, "50-50." I don't like to think I was lying so much as my brain and mouth had been in disagreement. Anyway, a coin toss was good enough for Peter: Go.

I had lived in Australia when I was a teenager. I dropped out of high school and surfed and dived—quite pleasant, really, even if I'd given my parents absolute fits. I knew that Byron Bay was a pretty spectacular place to hide out and smoke weed. Might as well start there.

I flew to Brisbane and drove to Byron Bay. You have to understand the strain of jet lag that follows a flight to Australia. I pulled into town and felt like I had cataracts. Also: What now? I hadn't thought beyond getting to Byron Bay. I was like, I guess I'll go to the beach.

I walked along the beach for about ten minutes… hoping I'd run into Ricky Williams? But honestly also hoping I wouldn't, because I wanted to travel some more. I looked at the ocean and breathed in the salt and tried to feel more like a human. I was in a total dream state.

Eventually I ran into a leathery Australian man with long hair and a beard. He was wearing a tiny pair of shorts, and that was it. He seemed like someone who would know where someone like Ricky Williams might be. I asked him if he'd seen an extremely fast American man lately.

"Yeah," he said. Okay, sorry to bother—Wait, what? The man said that a man matching my description was staying at a campground-turned-commune in the trees outside of town. I was like, No way. But what else was I going to do? I staggered to the campground like a drunk.

I found this hippie jungle paradise and went into the welcome hut and asked if someone named Ricky was staying there. A friendly woman said, "Yeah, he's in the tents." Now I thought… Is it actually possible that I've found Ricky Williams? In 20 minutes? No fucking way.

I walked over to "the tents." There were maybe a hundred tents pitched all over the place. I thought, Do I just stand here and monitor the tents like a weirdo? That's when I heard a soft American voice coming out of a little kitchen hut. "Oh no, thank you," the voice said.

I put my head through the door and there he was: Ricky Williams in the flesh. He was turning celery into juice. I said, "Ricky?" And he turned around: "Yes?" And I said, "It's me, Chris. From Esquire." And Ricky said: "Wow, you found me." And I said, "Yeah! I FOUND YOU."

I called Peter from the bank of pay phones outside the campground. He couldn't believe it. "What? Found who?" Ricky and I spent eight wonderful days together. Whale watching. Playing poker. Getting super high with a Gandalf-looking guy named Mystic Steve.

But that first night, we just went to a movie together, "The Village." I was wiped out and fell asleep. I woke up when the lights came on, with my head on Ricky's shoulder. I had no idea where I was. I just knew I was there with Ricky Williams, like I was always going to be.