

TRUEHOOP PRESENTS

Pat Riley's Final Test



This was the NBA legend's most difficult season in 50 years. So why, after nine championships, doesn't he just walk away? If only it were that easy.

by Wright Thompson

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The digital clock above the door in Pat Riley's presidential suite counts down the minutes to tip-off. The room is in a back hallway underneath the arena, a few feet from the secret path beneath the bleachers that he takes to his seat. I sit on the couch and read a laminated prayer card the team made for the game. Nobody else is here; his wife, Chris, is out blessing different parts of the arena. Tip-off is 29 minutes away, the last game of the season. The Heat need to win and see one of two other teams lose to make the playoffs. Still no sign of Riley. For the past two months, he and I have spoken nearly every day, which continues to shock his wife, who knows how private he can be. But earlier today, someone with the Heat suggested I tread lightly. The boss is in a mood. A peak state of Rileyness.

Then my phone buzzes.

"R u here?" Riley texts.

He sends his assistant, Karen, down to get me.

"It's tense," she says as we climb the stairs and approach the glass walls of his office, where he sits in an easy chair near the sofa, alone. It's quiet and dark, the blinds half-drawn, blocking out the view of the water. A three- or four-day growth on his face makes him look gaunt and tired. Around him, he's got the talismans that might bring him luck: a strange statue of Buddha reimagined as a Heat fan, and a Bob Dylan lyric taped to his bookshelf: "When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose."

Karen hands him a coffee, in one of those thin green Gatorade cups.

He sighs, and shifts his weight, and sips.

These past months have been an emotional time to be around him; the public highs and lows have been mirrored by the most difficult private challenge he's ever faced. Not long ago he said the scariest thing in the world was "extinction," or the emptiness that might swallow him if he ever managed to leave basketball behind, which he's considering. Waiting out the start of the game, we circle a familiar subject: There are changes he'd like to make in his life, if he could ever escape the seductive rhythms of the NBA calendar. The prayer cards being passed out downstairs have a quote on the back, part of which asks: *Will I lie down or will I fight?* For the past 50 years, and especially this season, that question has been central to Riley's daily life, a man perpetually seeking out opportunities to prove himself worthy of his reputation. The problem is that every time he proves himself, he puts off his future by another day.

A horn sounds somewhere below, breaking the stillness of his office.

"Watch the time," Karen says.

"What time is it?" he asks.

"Three minutes to 8," she says.

Riley slips on his jacket, and we walk past the empty offices. His feet don't make any sound on the soft red and black carpet in the back stairway down to the court. The noise of the arena gets louder the closer he gets, thumping bass at first, then the high-pitched whine of a packed house. He loves these gladiatorial walks, a feeling few people ever know, the pounding adrenaline and the roaring, unseen crowd. Minutes from tip-off, he passes the empty locker room. His team is on the floor. There's a mural there in the hall, a blown-up photograph of Ray Allen's famous 2013 3-pointer in the Finals, and he stops to stare for a moment. He looks at the fans in the background of the photo, studying the desperation in their faces, he says, like he's looking in a mirror at himself.

THIS SEASON HAS challenged Riley as much as any in the past 50 years. The troubles began swirling three years ago, in the summer of 2014. Behind the Big Three -- LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh -- the Heat had been to four straight Finals, winning two titles, and Riley felt as if he had built something greater than his Showtime Lakers, something to rival even the Bill Russell-led Celtics. But James was a free agent that summer, and Riley and his guys flew out to Las Vegas to make their case for him to stay in Miami.

Riley told his lieutenant, Andy Elisburg, to get the two championship trophies LeBron had won and pack them in their hard-shell carrying cases. Elisburg also brought charts and an easel for a presentation about the free agents the Heat would pursue. The day of the meeting, a hotel bellhop followed them with a luggage cart carrying the presentation and the two trophies. Riley brought wine from a Napa vineyard named Promise. It was the same label Maverick Carter had presented Riley with when they did the deal four years earlier. Riley respects Carter, and when he walked into the suite and saw James with agent Rich Paul and friend Randy Mims but no Maverick, part of him knew the meeting wasn't sincere. He told Elisburg to keep the trophies and easel in the hall. James and his associates were watching a World Cup game, which they kept glancing at during the presentation. At one point, Riley asked if they'd mute the TV.

Riley flew home worried and got a text telling him to be ready for a call. About 15 minutes later, his phone rang and Paul was on the other end. The agent handed the phone to LeBron, who started by saying, "I want to thank you for four years ..."

"I was silent," Riley says. "I didn't say anything. My mind began to just go. And it was over. I was very angry when LeBron left. It was personal for me. It just was. I had a very good friend who talked me off the ledge and kept me from going out there and saying something like Dan Gilbert. I'm glad I didn't do it."

The next year, the Heat missed the playoffs, Riley consumed with self-doubt, his own mind whispering that he'd stayed too long. Then last season Miami lost Bosh to blood clots, but the team still fought to the playoffs, falling to the Raptors in seven in the Eastern Conference semifinals. On the flight back from Toronto, Riley and his staff drank wine and debated the free agents they'd get to join Wade for another deep playoff run.

The beginning of July, all that fell apart.

Wade decided to leave Miami, his bond with Riley fractured. They'd been like family once, with Wade visiting Riley at home and Riley a guest at Wade's wedding. But with Bosh's return in grave doubt, Wade saw an uncertain future in Miami -- and just like that, the Big Three had disintegrated. Hurt and wounded, Riley and his wife booked a last-minute trip to Paris, leaving three days later for a reprieve and a few Bruce Springsteen shows. During the first one, Springsteen played Riley's favorite song: "Land of Hope and Dreams." It's an anthem for Riley, because he spends a lot of time imagining the future he might have, when all his battles have been fought and won. He dreams of a different life, and not in an abstract way. He *sees* it, down to the taste of the dinner he'll eat and the music he'll play.

That night, standing close to the stage, he sang along. The people who recognized him in the general admission pit saw the exterior: good-looking, tanned and well-dressed. Most can't see past that image, which is perhaps its point. His inside is as messy and complex as his outside is manicured and defined. Chris Riley has always viewed any issue, including the pain over losing Wade, through her intimate knowledge of her husband's hidden motivations and scars: It'd been 60 years since he scored 19 points as a sixth-grader, and the same nun who locked him in the church basement, forgetting him there with the rats and cobwebs, gave him a standing ovation after the buzzer, setting into motion all the urges that sent him running to Paris.

Back home, his friends wondered how he might be handling such a public failure. Two pals from various yacht trips over the years, Dick Butera and Peter Guber, ran into each other during the offseason, their conversation recounted by Butera.

"Have you seen Pat?" Dick asked. "Is he gonna stay?"

"Pat will be always be Pat," Peter said.

"You mean the contest is still on?" Dick asked.

"The game is never gonna be over," Peter said.

His friends know him well. Eight days after returning from Paris, Riley went to Erik Spoelstra's wedding, at an old mansion and gardens on the water in Miami. Randy Pfund, who left his job as Heat GM after Riley stopped coaching in 2008, walked over to his table to say hello. Riley didn't

open with tales of Paris or gushing praise for the flowers or bride. Almost immediately, he started giving his side of the Wade departure.

"Within 15 seconds," Pfund says.



Chris Riley, Pat's wife, has stood by him through many title runs, including this one in 1985. MICHAEL TWEED/AP PHOTO

EVEN AS HE obsesses over the Heat, in this or any other year, part of Riley's mind is never far from his estate on the Pacific in Malibu. Sometimes he checks the live security cameras just to feel close to the place. He and Chris spend about a month there at the end of every offseason, surrounded by their oldest friends. She calls it their "heart home."

Last year he took the most concrete action he's ever taken to make that dreamed future a reality. He signed a new five-year contract, with the understanding that he can work anywhere, including his perch overlooking the Pacific. His friends have been wondering for years when he'd head west, all of them following the internal conflict they've come to know as Miami vs. Malibu. "I love the schism because that's all he talks about," says his friend, the actor Michael Douglas. "That's all he talks about, getting back to Malibu to that house."

When Douglas discusses Riley's life in Florida, and the one he might live in California, he's not talking about geography. Each place serves as an easy code to describe the competing sides of Riley's personality. Miami represents the man living 6 inches in front of his face, Douglas says. One of many examples: Near the end of his last season with the Lakers, in 1990, he screamed at the players in a hotel ballroom and punched a mirror, shattering it and cutting his hand so deeply that bright red blood covered the sleeve of his crisp white shirt. He has punched mirrors and walls, wept

and raged and trashed locker rooms. He has carried and nursed grudges. "Is Pat a dick?" Pfund says, repeating a question. "I know hundreds and hundreds of people who would say worse than that."

The other Riley loves emojis -- texting hearts, smiley faces and sunsets, praying hands, cute baby heads and palm trees. He has written six unproduced screenplays. Enamored with his 5-year-old grandson, he's teaching him about old cars and buying him toys that play the Motown classic "My Girl." There's a contagious joy in his eyes. At bar mitzvahs, he's been the only adult on the dance floor of kids, leaving when the music stops and he's covered in sweat. He shows up for people who matter to him; when his college teammate Tommy Kron died, the family walked into the church that morning to find two people: the priest and a grieving Riley. He's been all over the world with friends on boats; he's often the one with binoculars scanning coasts for little bars where they can surrender for an afternoon and night. "They drink and they sing and they play music," says actress Lynda Carter, a longtime friend best known for playing Wonder Woman. "And he loves Springsteen and Motown and doo-wop. He and my daughter, Jess, were singing these duets, 'Red Dirt Road,' by Brooks & Dunn. They are crooning together and playing air guitar."

The flexibility in his contract about Malibu, then, isn't about distance. It's a vow he's making -- about the kind of person he can still be, even as a 72-year-old man. The entire estate, from the porches with the million-dollar views to the bocce ball court near the beach, is full of little promises.

He's got a guitar collection out there, because one day he swears he will learn to play "My Girl" for Chris. He dreams of strumming her that song, and she dreams of planting a garden, and they both dream of hammocks on the beach. He's planning to move half his antique cars -- he's got nearly a dozen -- out to Malibu. Five minutes from the estate, he found a storage facility to keep them all. He rented every available bay, so they're all sitting there empty, waiting. The owner called him not long ago, worried that one person had all his space and wasn't using it, wanting a long-term tenant and not some fickle rich guy who might up and leave.

"What is your plan?" the man asked.

"These are going to be filled one day," Riley said.

He owns three houses in a row, purchased one at a time starting in the Showtime days when his kids were young. One of his many dreams is for the family to have a compound, for Pat and Chris to have a house, and for James and Elisabeth to each have one too. That vision got him through many long seasons and those lonely nights in hotel bars -- the belief that he wasn't giving up a life, just postponing it a bit. For 30 years, he's told himself a story about the man he will be, about the family he will have, once he reaches his destination. But now his kids are grown, 32 and 28, with lives of their own and no time for a compound. They're busy.

He waited too long.

PAT RILEY BEGAN his NBA playing career in 1967. In October, when the 2016-17 campaign began, it marked the 50th year he's lived by the code of Riley: When the team sucks, *he* sucks. And the Heat suck. They suck in ways big and small. The team blows a 19-point lead in the home opener. Wade beats the Heat in his return to Miami, off an infuriating and iffy foul call. On Dec. 12, they are third to last in the conference, 7-17, when the Riley family gets news that makes all that losing cease to matter.

Lis, their 28-year-old daughter who'd gotten married the year before and moved to Denver, notices she has massively swollen lymph nodes. Pat and Chris rush to Denver, where a doctor tells them what they'd feared the most: It looks like cancer, lymphoma, and they should schedule a procedure and then wait for confirmation.

The Heat lose four of five, but Pat's mind is elsewhere. For all his children's lives, he has felt as if he could solve any problem they encountered. When his son, James, went to boarding school, Pat flew up early to make sure the young man's room was arranged perfectly, likely in search of a grand gesture to ease his guilt for all he'd missed. The morning James was scheduled to report, Pat found the dorm locked around 5 a.m., so he climbed in the window and went over everything again, down to the space between shirts in the closet. On the day of Elisabeth's wedding, he raised hell with the planners, making them redo the draping and piping on a table minutes before rushing to change clothes and walk her down the aisle.

But illness he cannot fix.

"A father's worst feeling," Riley says, "is the feeling of helplessness when his little girl is exactly that: helpless."

On Christmas Eve, Pat and Chris fly to Denver to see Lis and her husband, Paul. The four of them pile into a hotel suite. Pat opens a few bottles of Screaming Eagle, a cabernet they love. Lis gives them matching red-and-black-checked pajamas, so Pat and Chris put them on and all four curl up to watch movies, like they did when the kids were young. Outside, the snow comes down. Chris holds Lis on the couch, while Pat and his son-in-law sit on sofas on either side, all eight feet on the same ottoman. In the hotel suite, Pat thinks about game days when the kids were growing up. It's funny what comes back when you're scared. Chris would keep the children occupied so he could nap, and then he'd get up and come down to the big center landing and whistle. He can really whistle -- once he randomly saw Magic Johnson walking down a beach in the Bahamas and hid behind a dune and let out a loud one, watching the star jump and swivel -- and when he whistled for his kids, he'd yell, "Triple kisses!" They'd come running and give him a kiss good luck. Sitting on a couch, wondering if his daughter might have lymphoma, he remembers triple kisses.

THE MEMORIES COME, Lis in her wedding dress, the day they brought James home, stopping first at the Pacific Ocean so the baby boy could see the wonder and the power Pat and Chris loved so much. Sliding back, his own wedding, the yellow 1967 Corvette he drove when he met Chris, the last time he spoke to his father, his bench-warming in the pros, everybody's All-American at Kentucky, back to the streets of Schenectady, New York. He can smell the high school gymnasium. Maybe it was his senior year. He drove the lane and thought he'd been fouled. When the referee called a charge, he turned and headed the other way. The gym got murmuring and tense, and Riley didn't see his father running drunk onto the court -- exactly like the scene in *Hoosiers*, he'd tell people years later, on the rare occasion when he'd share the story -- and going after the ref. Lee Riley had been a baseball player and often blamed people for his unrealized dreams, including this particular official, who'd umpired the minor league games he managed. Pat didn't even know his dad was at the game, Lee having hidden beneath the bleachers, and Pat saw his beloved high school coach, Walt Przybylo, take charge and escort Lee off the court so the game could resume. Riley adored Walt, later hiring one of his sons as a scout for the Heat. The night before Kentucky's NCAA final against Texas Western in 1966, stress caused Pat's feet to break out in painful sores. While Pat tried to sleep, Walt sat up all night gently soaking his feet, an act almost biblical in its devotion.

Lee and Mary Riley did not come to the game. They never saw him play a single time in college or the NBA. They never explained why.

Lee played for 17 minor league teams in 16 seasons and quit in 1943 to work in a factory during the war. A year later, the Phillies offered him a major league contract, and for four glorious games, he was delivered this miracle of a second chance. He got one hit in 12 at-bats, on April 30, 1944. The next day the organization bought a minor league team in upstate New York and sent Lee to play for it. Pat was born 10 months later. In 1952, when Lee was managing a minor league club, he got suspended 90 days for stalling during a game. He quit professional baseball. When he got home, he burned all his gear and memorabilia and rarely spoke of those lost years. In 1970, he died, leaving many things unsaid. "I can't remember my father ever telling me he loved me," Pat says. "Not much from my mother either."

In his mind, Pat finds himself pulled toward 58 Spruce St.

He remembers it as a dark place, loud with unspoken words. The Rileys didn't talk about anything. Pat had a sister die in infancy 10 years before he was born, according to a book about World War II baseball, which dedicated a section to Lee Riley. Until I brought this to his attention, Pat had never heard the story of his infant sister. It's possible the book is wrong, he says, or that his parents kept the secret to themselves. His mom rarely left the house, and he'd come home to find her sitting

downstairs, on top of the only heat register, trying to stay warm. Another family lives in the house now, but there remains a worn spot on the floor and wall in the shape of Mary Riley.

He remembers his trips back home through the years and how every single time, he would find himself driving past all these places, his house, Walt's house, the bar where his dad drank away a decade, the high school gymnasium. Once he accidentally set off the alarm in the gym, which is now named after him. He remembers his greatest games and the time his dad ran onto the court to defend him. That's how he decided to eventually tell that story, cleaning up his father whenever he could, even to himself. Riley talked about Lee to his players, to schoolkids and corporate executives. Over time, he rewrote his own father, punching up stories and inventing others, a mixture of Lee and Walt and the books Pat read for inspiration. Imagination and willpower were always Pat's two most important gifts, and along the way he used both to create the man he thought Lee Riley deserved to be. Before one speech in 1997, at the ceremony naming the high school gym in Riley's honor, a friend's video camera catches Pat and his mom talking.

"Make sure you don't tell anybody when I'm not telling the truth," he said.

His mom and older sister burst out laughing, and he went onstage.

He told that auditorium of students about his dad coming into his room at night to give him wisdom, telling him he was made of special stuff. Chris Riley, a trained therapist, saw through him then and sees through him now. Over the years, she's watched her husband construct the dad he wanted. There were no fatherly bedside chats on Spruce Street.

"Are you kidding me?" she says. "It was so much bleaker than that."



Before their parting, Riley and Dwyane Wade weren't only champions – the team president attended Wade's wedding. PAUL SANCYA/AP PHOTO

OUT IN DENVER, in the dark of the hotel suite, they watch movies, a Christmas special, then *The Accountant* and *Deepwater Horizon*. Everybody sleeps in the next morning. Nothing matters but the wait, not the losses piling up, not anything, until Jan. 11, when the doctors deliver surprising news. No cancer.

A month later, a perfect Sunday, Pat Riley cranks his black 1971 Chevelle, wanting to escape the busy streets of Miami Beach, aiming toward the vast nothingness to the southwest. He downshifts, the 502-horsepower Chevelle bucking and roaring under the yoke of the lower gear. The sound blasts off the art deco facades. Since his daughter's news, the Heat have, improbably, gone on a winning streak. The team won at home and on the road, knocking off the Warriors with a last-second shot, fighting out of an 18-point fourth-quarter hole to beat the Nets. They've run off 13 straight victories, transforming themselves from a team that was better off tanking to a playoff contender.

Now on the road, Riley is exhaling.


The stereo plays "Listen to the Music," then "Born to Run," and he turns up the volume. He laughs and talks to people a lane over in traffic when he accidentally grinds the gears. A circle of sweat spreads on the back of his shirt. He seems light and happy, and he says he's been reborn.

His arm hangs out the window. "I owe everybody a lot," he says. "A lot. I owe them all a lot, but ..."

He pauses, considering how many times he's climbed a mountain only to get knocked down and start climbing again. "I don't owe them anything anymore," he says, forcefully, as if conviction will make the words true. He's trying, still deeply invested in the positive parts of building and running a team but saying he's free at last from the negative motivations he's never been able to control. In two days, he and Chris are flying to the Bahamas to sail around on a boat with their oldest and best friends, a break after the stress and joy of the past two months. He would have never done that 10 years ago, he says.

His slicked-back hair is white now and a little fluffy on the sides. The outskirts of Miami pass in a blur of car dealerships, no-cover strip clubs and canals. He shifts gears and accelerates, hurtling away from the city where he's worked these past 22 years.

"I don't have to get pulled back into this one more time," he says.





One of Riley's favorite teams to coach was the Showtime Lakers. Here, he draws up plays with Magic Johnson (32) and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (33) in 1989. ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

HE ALMOST GOT away. That's the thing. Four years ago, he missed his chance. Now, of course, he sees the lost moment so clearly. He remembers the night, Aug. 10, 2013, his 50th high school reunion, a party decades in the making, part of the Schenectady he's carried with him: intense loyalty for the people who held him up, and a loneliness Chris could sense when they met. He longed to go back -- to the time and the place -- and two months after the 2013 Finals, flush with back-to-back titles, he did.

He served as social chair for the event, booking the Four Tops *and* the Temptations. No detail escaped his attention; he even stopped at a local production studio to review the short video that would play during the event. His close friends Paul Heiner and Warren DeSantis oversaw logistics. Riley demanded to pay for all of it, a bill that eventually topped \$160,000.

"This f---ing ridiculous reunion of yours," Heiner came to lovingly call it.

Stage lights bathed the gymnasium in purple. The music started, one familiar hit after another. Pat and Chris danced right up in front. If it's possible for an entire life to lead to a single moment, this was it: back-to-back titles for the second time in Riley's career, listening to the music he and his wife loved, in the place where his journey began. He couldn't remember a happier time, and somewhere in the revelry, he realized he should walk away from basketball. "I thought this is what life should be," he says. "Friends, family and fun. A lot of thought about enough is enough. A time to leave with all debts paid to the game and nothing to suck me back in."

The Four Tops came out for a duet with the Temps and called Pat up onstage.

The band kicked into "My Girl."

A yellow spotlight pointed down on him when the last verse came around. "I don't need no money, fortune or fame ... ," he sang, a little shaky. "I got all the riches, baby, one man can claim."

He pointed at Chris in the front row, and for just a little while, it seemed as if he might get out, a legend by any definition, with nine rings as a player, assistant coach, head coach and president, his marriage and family intact, nothing to prove.

He stayed.

IT'S MID-FEBRUARY, and even as the Heat push toward the eighth and final spot in the playoffs, the rise and fall of the Big Three shadows the season. The week before the All-Star break, Dwyane Wade appears on Yahoo's popular basketball podcast. For the first time, he says a driving reason for his departure from Miami was hurt feelings over Riley never calling him. Wade says Riley didn't reach out, and Dwyane felt he deserved respect after helping deliver three titles. Heat PR man and longtime consigliere Tim Donovan doesn't alert Riley to the interview, but Pat has clearly heard about it because he shows up late for a lunch and immediately wants to tell his side.

“I know he feels I didn't fight hard enough for him. I was very, very sad when Dwyane said no.” - PAT RILEY

When the conversation naturally drifts toward other topics, he steers it back.

Riley says that Wade's agent asked to deal directly with the owners instead of Pat, so he merely honored that request. Mostly, he just wishes the whole thing had gone differently. "I know he feels I didn't fight hard enough for him," he says. "I was very, very sad when Dwyane said no. I wish I could have been there and told him why I didn't really fight for him at the end. ... I fought for the team. The one thing I wanted to do for him, and maybe this is what obscured my vision, but I wanted to get him another player so he could end his career competitive."

When he describes his reaction to Wade's leaving, it's always in terms of how sad it makes him feel, and while his emotions toward James' return to Cleveland were primal in the months, and even years, afterward, now he understands why LeBron had to leave.

"He went home because he had to go home," he says. "It was time. It was really time for him to go home, in his prime. If he's ever gonna do anything in Akron again, this was the time to do it. Otherwise, he'd have had a scarlet letter on his back the rest of his whole life."

But of course, Riley says, almost immediately after LeBron left, Bosh's camp wanted to reopen a deal they'd just finished, knowing the Heat had money and felt vulnerable. Bosh threatened to sign with the Rockets. In the end, Riley gave Bosh what he wanted. Now he wishes he'd said no to

Bosh's max deal and given all that money to Wade. (James and Bosh declined to comment for this story. Wade issued a statement thanking Riley for their years together.)

"You never think it's gonna end," Riley says. "Then it always ends."

THE HEAT'S CLIMB into playoff contention hits a spot in Riley's brain nothing else can hit. *You've still got it, Riley. One more time.* It starts as a whisper, which these days he says he chooses not to hear. With the team clawing toward that eighth and final seed in the East, he says, "I've let go of all the stuff that used to hold me to the grind." He and Chris sit at a back table at a South Beach steakhouse, looking out at the water. A staff member calls him Coach.

"Am I different?" Pat asks.

"He's on his way," Chris says.

"I'm on my way," he says, smiling.

"I can't say the craziness isn't still there," she says.

"I wanna win, honey," he says. "We both wanna win."

Reaching into her purse, Chris hands him a small ziplock bag of pills, a cocktail of homeopathic medicine and vitamins they take to ward off the kudzu creep of time. Both preach the effectiveness of Eastern medicine. Although Pat went to a therapist only once -- five minutes into the session, he burst into tears, stood up and never returned -- Chris says he's done a lot of soul-searching about many things, mainly his father, the taproot of his drive and his inability to stop driving.

She stops and starts, trying to articulate her thoughts.

She exhales.

"He's good," she says finally. "He's much better. He's clearly forgiven his father. That's the peace he's made. Now, whether he comes to peace with himself with that is another thing."

She hears what he says about not owing anyone anything anymore.

"He's talking about it," she says. "Do I trust it?"

She's right to be skeptical. Sitting on his desk at the arena, he's got a monitor with a live video feed from the practice court. On a random Tuesday during the second half of the season, around 4:30 in the afternoon, he works at his desk. With the team on the road and no players to watch, he leans over a piece of paper, grinding on a task he should probably delegate, drawing up the seating charts for a charity dinner.

"He's putting in 12 to 14 hours," she says.

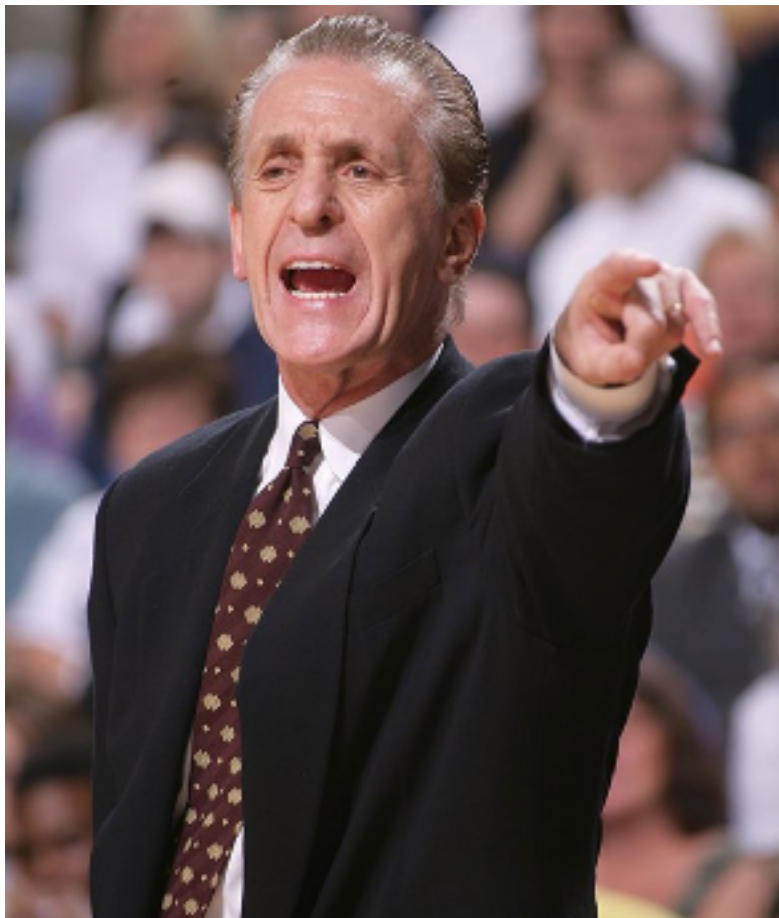
He insists he's different, and while Chris Riley believes he's sincere in his desire, she understands his personal code, perhaps even better than he does: The better the Heat play, the louder the siren song of more becomes.

"How do you change what got you everything you've got?" she says.

"It's embedded," he says.

When she looks at him, she sees a man with an incredible tolerance for pain and work, but she also sees a sixth-grader getting a standing ovation from the nuns.

"You perform to get your goodies," Chris says. "You can psychologically know your issues, but the key is: Can you change the habits?"



One side of Riley has punched mirrors and walls, wept and raged and trashed locker rooms. The other side loves emojis and writes screenplays.
JESSE D. GARRABRANT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

THE STRETCH RUN is a test. With just 20 games left in the season, Riley has done the math. The Heat need to go 13-7 to beat out the Pacers and Bulls for the eighth seed. Tonight, in March, Cleveland is in the building, photographers hanging in the private underground concourses, trying to snap a photo of LeBron. Watching the digital clock in his suite, Riley leans back on a red chair with his arms crossed. He's holding court with one of his oldest friends, Peter Guber, who sits on a low-slung couch to his left. The playoffs are within reach.

"You've crept up from the bottom," Guber says. "You're right on the cusp."

"Are we really the 11-30 team or the 17-4 team?" Riley says.

LeBron doesn't play, resting, and the Heat blow out the Cavs. There's almost a fight at the end of the game, and after it, Miami flies to Cleveland for an immediate rematch. Already, Riley is thinking about setting the table one last time, not necessarily winning a title but putting the pieces in place. He isn't going to Cleveland, he says when asked, because that time in his life has passed. In 1985, for Game 6 of the Finals, he wanted to wear a white tuxedo and a shamrock bow tie in Boston -- "a lot more hubris then," he says -- but now that belongs to Spoelstra and the players.

"I will go work in the garden and pick some fresh vegetables and play with my grandson while they battle," he says. "We will have a great meal as we watch the game on TV."

"You have a garden?"

"A major plan," he replies. "Right now all imagery, but I see it."

He sees the vegetables, with Chris in those thick gloves with a shovel, yet he also sees one more title run. The competing visions leave him conflicted. "I NEED ONE MORE," he writes in a text message immediately after talking about the garden. "AND I KNOW THIS WILL BE THE TOUGHEST TO GET."

The team wins that night in Cleveland and keeps winning, muscling past Chicago and Detroit. On the second full day of the NCAA tournament, the Heat finally make it to eighth place alone.

Riley flies west to scout games.

That first night, he stops over in Malibu before a flight to Sacramento in the morning. He lounges on the deck. The clock on his phone says 4:48 p.m. It's the "golden hour," as he calls it, which usually means he turns on the "R&B 2" playlist, watching the sun set to a soundtrack of the Chi-Lites and Frankie Beverly. But today, he listens to just a few songs on repeat, by singer-songwriter Jason Isbell, "Something More Than Free" and "Traveling Alone."

They're about loneliness and labor and the emptiness of being made to travel a road not of your choosing. *I've grown tired of traveling alone.* The ocean is close enough that the waves drone white noise instead of rising and falling swells. His two lives flash through his mind, the one he keeps

dreaming about and the one he's actually living. The songs repeat again. He calls Chris to talk about what he feels. Three decades ago, they planned a life here, in their heart home, with this view every day. He wants more Malibu and less Miami, feeling his "tipping point" close at hand, as he puts it, but there's another flight to catch in the morning. He stares out at the sunset.

"Instead of this," he says, "I go to work!"

THE MEMORIES COME again, punching walls in Miami after losing a playoff series, unable to face the team; headlines in New York when he left -- "Pat the Rat" -- back to 1985, a cramped, un-air-conditioned locker room beneath the Boston Garden. The Lakers screamed and poured champagne. They'd finally beaten the Celtics -- and in Boston -- avoiding three straight Finals losses and the likely end of Riley's career. No more newspaper stories about the "LA Fakers." Pat had wanted only to find Chris. *Where was she?* Then he saw her, leaning against the wall by the training room. "I was across the room by the shower entrance," he says years later, "but noticed she was watching and waiting for me all the time to free myself of the others. When we finally locked eyes and moved toward each other, that path opened like the Red Sea. The tears just flowed before we could embrace. Tears just flowing with happiness, joy and relief at the sight of each other and this big moment. We embraced hard, and I lifted her up. My Girl Chris, man. She said we earned this. She said this is ours forever."

These things come to him on a barstool on the next-to-last day of the 2016-17 season.

He orders a double martini.

The story doesn't end with the embrace, he says.

He stirs his drink with a spear of olives.

Twenty-one years later, in 2006, he mistakenly threw away the ring he won that night, along with all his Lakers rings, the real ones mixed together with dozens of worthless samples for the Heat championship ring he was designing. The company gave him exact replicas, but they felt too shiny, with not enough dents and scratches, so he put them in a bag and beat them against a wall. Instead of adding scars and patina, he just knocked loose a bunch of diamonds. When he got them fixed, he locked the replicas in a safe at home. With Pat Riley, there's no self-curated shrine to his own former glories. The past can't possibly compete with the season he's living and breathing today, waiting out the next-to-last afternoon with a martini in a South Beach bar.

It's April 11, five days since the Heat slipped out of that eighth playoff spot they'd worked so hard to earn. He feels tired and depressed. The losses and the shrinking math have pushed Riley into a hole, drowning in the darkness. He hates how a loss, even after all these years, crushes the joy he'd felt hours earlier playing with

his grandson. One game remains, tomorrow night. Miami needs to win, then hope for Chicago or Indiana to lose. Inside, he already knows the truth. In about 18 hours, they will come up one victory short of the playoffs -- all these months culminating in exactly nothing, just a guy coming home and staring at a quote on his mirror: Warriors don't live in the past; the past is dead; life is now and the future is waiting.

Over drinks, the day before that 82nd and final game, next season comes into focus. They're not good enough to beat the Warriors with the current lineup. *He's* not good enough. The team needs at least one star, and probably two, to compete.

The sun makes the waterfront room feel light and easy.

A bartender talks with a singsong Dublin lilt.

Sitting on his stool, Riley tells stories about the Native American chief Tecumseh, and about an old thoroughbred horse who broke his leg in the homestretch and got a bullet to the head instead of a garland of roses. Finished with his martini, Riley orders one more before heading home to dinner, planning his goodbye speech to this team he's grown to love. The simplicity of tomorrow clarifies him. He smiles. In the late-afternoon happy hour glow, he sees himself clearly, not as he wants to be but as he is. No roses for him, just a long stretch of track and a bullet with his name on it, one day, when he can't run anymore.

"You know the greatest lie in the world?" he says, starting to laugh. "Pat's retiring to Malibu."

