

Run for the Hell of It:

50 Running Adventures
from 5K to 100 Miles

Gavin Boyter

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For runners everywhere.

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Introduction

In February 2020, I blew up my life.

Perhaps this is an exaggeration, but that's how it felt at the time. In the space of a few weeks, I moved out of the house I shared with my then-fiancée, quit my job, and embarked, only partly voluntarily, on a quest to reinvent myself. For those of you who read my previous book, *Running the Orient*, the above may come as something of a revelation. For those readers, I should explain what happened. For the rest of you, a little context is necessary.

In 2018 my girlfriend Aradhna and I had an incredible adventure. We travelled from Paris to Istanbul, following the route of the 1883 Orient Express, passing through eight European countries, and covering over 2300 miles. I ran that distance while Aradhna drove our self-converted campervan. As you might imagine, we had many adventures, misadventures, and surprise encounters (with, amongst others, Austrian farming families, Turkish soldiers, feral dogs, and a pack of wild boar). Our adventure lasted 110 days and at the end of it, having squirrelled away an engagement ring, I popped the question to my long-suffering partner and to my delight, she said yes.

But life isn't a romcom, in which after the requisite obstacles and hilarious scrapes, two people are forever united in blissful happiness. Real life is more complicated than that and some obstacles cannot be overcome. Aradhna and I had our difficulties, even before we set off on our pan-European wanderings. However, in March 2019 I did something that tipped the balance into the red, and we never recovered. I'm not going to tell you what it is, not because I'm being needlessly coy, but because it's too personal, too painful, and not relevant to the book you're currently reading. All you need to know is that our split was largely my doing, and the

fact that Aradhna remains a close friend is testimony to her huge powers of forgiveness and forbearance. I am ashamed of how I acted, and of the consequences of those actions, and have done a lot of soul-searching, some of it with the assistance of mental health professionals.

As I said, the immediate consequence of my wrongdoing was that our relationship broke down. It took a year, a painful period in which we struggled to rebuild trust and understanding and instead came to understand how intractable our differences were. We parted fondly, sadly, but inevitably. I moved out and crashed in a best friend's spare room for a few weeks, whilst considering my next move.

Meanwhile, and not unconnected to the above trauma, things were becoming fraught at work. I was employed in the administration office of an NHS mental health service, a fairly mundane position but one that at least had the benefit of contributing to actual, measurable wellbeing, for our patients at least. I'd agreed to take on a secondment into a temporarily vacant management position, looking after a small admin team. My line manager was keenly aware that I had no managerial experience, and she probably sensed my reticence and need for close supervision. As an employee, I have always appreciated a hands-off approach to management, whereby the manager has little day to day input, as long as targets are being met and the service runs smoothly. My line manager in this job, with a background in the private sector, favoured a more hands-on approach with regular one-to-ones, training and appraisals.

With such close scrutiny, I found I was forever on the wrong side of something. I'd missed an opportunity to intervene in a crisis, to jump in on an error made by a colleague, to mediate in a micro-conflict. I felt baffled by much of this, wondering why I couldn't just be left alone to get on with things. I'd previously had managers who were even more arms-length in their approach than I was being, and they had seemed to do just fine. Ultimately, I couldn't do

what was being asked of me. This was framed as a shortcoming I should work on, rather than a temperamental condition I might never overcome because I neither wanted to, nor saw the value of changing my behaviour.

I found it ironic that I'd put myself in the same position my own father found himself in, when he too was promoted into a management role he hated. My dad solved this conundrum by taking early retirement. At 48, this was not an option open to me. After one too many rancorous arguments with my boss, one in which I'm ashamed to say I entirely lost my temper, I handed in my notice. A few weeks later, I was free, and immediately felt a strange combination of elation and fear. I had some savings, but I knew I'd need some of that for a deposit on a new rental apartment. I'd also inherited Roxy, our globetrotting Mazda Bongo campervan. She'd need taxed, MOT-ed and I'd have to figure out how to park her in London (as a diesel vehicle I'd have to work around recent emissions controls).

I decided that many of these problems could be postponed with a short, restorative trip up north, visiting a friend in Glasgow, then taking a trip to Glenelg on the west coast, where I might walk upon Gavin Maxwell's¹ beach and look for otters and porpoises. I needed to silence the raging, fearful voices in my head, and where better to do this than in my home country, surrounded by mountains? Aradhna was happy to let me keep my boxed-up possessions in the spare room until I could secure a new home and my parents and sisters in (or near) Edinburgh were looking forward to a visit on my way back to London.

In mid-February, entirely the wrong time to take a holiday in the Scottish Highlands, I drove up to Glasgow at Roxy's top speed (75mph with a prevailing wind) and spent a few

¹ My namesake was the author of numerous travel and adventure books and an early pioneer of nature writing. His most famous book is *Ring of Bright Water*, first published in 1960. He lived a fragile existence on Sandaig Beach for many years, renaming it *Camusfearna* to fend off unwanted visitors.

days catching up with my sculptor friend Clementine, always a sympathetic ear to tales of career confusion and artistic struggle. I then made my way through snow-dusted peaks and valleys to Glenelg, a small, picturesque village overlooking Skye and the Sound of Sleat. At first the weather was remarkably civilized, as I parked Roxy on a lay-by on top of the Mam Ratigan, a 1116ft high peak overlooking Loch Duich. The view was spectacular and my run down to Glenelg and back (1219ft of ascent) was brutal but exquisitely invigorating. I began to regain that sense of calm quietude you don't really get in London, and nothing more taxing was required from my days than cooking pasta in Roxy's miniature hand-built kitchen, drinking a pint of ale in the woodsmoke-scented Glenelg Inn or strolling back to the van by the light of my iPhone's torch app, under a velvet sky pierced by pinpoint stars.

The idyll darkened somewhat when I went to visit the beach I'd walked upon so often as a child, in the company of my parents, with its many attendant memories – porpoises leaping beyond the miniature lighthouse (now dismantled), discovering what looked like an old WWII mine amongst the rocks, fleeing swarms of midges on an ill-advised teenage cycling trip. By contrast, this visit began with several wrong turns on the denuded forestry paths that weave their way down to Sandaig.

I parked on the road and took to a gravel path signposted with the tiniest of arrows. The path looped endlessly through forestry land, splitting and rollercoasting over the hilly landscape, and there were no more signs. Visitors had to sense their way and that afternoon my senses were stuffed with cotton wool. As the sky began to grey over, I took a wrong turning and ended up picking my way down to entirely the wrong beach, via a lividly green, mossy, tree tangled jungle. As drizzle darkened to heavy rain, I spent an hour edging my way around the coast, hanging off a rockface

above the surging tide at one point.

Eventually, drenched, half-crazed with cold and determination, I broke out onto Maxwell's hidden beach, and spent half an hour there getting even wetter and colder, communing with the past. That evening I rewarded myself with a burger and recovery pint in the Glenelg Inn, wondering if the Coronavirus outbreak I'd recently heard about would amount to anything. The weather showed no signs of breaking. In fact, it had strengthened to a storm that rattled Roxy and kept me awake all night with a constant assault of hail and rain. The Sound of Sleat took on a new and pressing meaning.

The following day I drove to Edinburgh and relaxed into the perennial comfort of the family home. A couple of days after that the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, announced a countrywide lockdown. Thus, the great dissolution began...

We all know what happened next. In a way, my timing couldn't have been better. Had I moved into a flat by myself in London, the resultant enforced isolation would not have improved my fragile mental health. It was good to spend an extended period with my parents, now in their mid-70s, and to be able to help them in small ways, such as getting in the weekly shop. I started writing short stories for the first time in years – daily 1000-word tales inspired by random words. I worked on my novel and had long, challenging runs in the gently beautiful Pentland Hills. I even essayed a complete marathon, for charity, in my parents' back garden, running barefoot for the first time on the lawn². Overall, it was a very predictable, regular, and relaxing time, with few duties and a lot of time to think.

Eventually of course, that too had to end. I needed to head back to London and find some way of earning a living. My one movie and two non-fiction books to date were not

² 878 circuits and 6.5 hours running, at the end of which my feet were screaming for release.

something I could build an empire upon. Finding a new job would now prove especially taxing, given hundreds of thousands of workers being put on government-funded furlough during the pandemic, businesses closing down, and employers proving extra cautious. I toyed with the idea of starting my own literary magazine or running a mobile bookshop but both plans seemed impractical and more likely to be ways of destroying my savings, rather than enlarging them. No – I'd have to face it – my opportunities, such as they were, lay back in London, where I might pick up leads, occasionally see my friends, in suitably socially-distanced ways of course, and learn to live like a proper adult again.

Fifty was staring me in the face, a half-century milestone that had sneaked up upon me like an evil clown, mocking and terrifying me in equal measure. What had I really achieved? And how pitiful did any tally of my achievements look when compared with what, in my twenties, I'd assumed would be my lot by now. Where was the self-designed house, ideally with a stream running through the wooded back garden? Where were the kids? Where, most vitally, was my soulmate? When I allowed my thoughts to explore these dark alleys of rumination, they seldom returned carrying anything good.

I wanted more adventures. I needed more than ever to maintain my physical fitness and I craved a project. Once I'd satisfied the basics – find a flat, sort out parking for Roxy, start earning a scrap or two from freelance copywriting – I wanted to plan another challenge. I quickly realised that anything on the scale of Running the Orient was out of the question. I simply did not have the resources, or the willing support. Those dreams of running the Great Patagonian Trail, Appalachian Way or length of New Zealand would have to wait. COVID-19 made travel planning impossible, in any case. Then something struck me – since fifty was bearing down on me, why not face it squarely with fifty challenges?

I realised that my limitations could be turned into strengths. Since I couldn't travel far, I'd stick to runs I could

reach in Roxy. Because I had limited resources, these would be one or two days in duration at most. And due to the pandemic, very few of them could be organised races, since large scale events were mostly being cancelled, postponed, or rendered “virtual.” What then would these fifty challenges in my fiftieth year consist of?

I already had a shortlist of things I’d planned to do for years in and around London – such as circuit the 65-mile Capital Ring³, finally take part in a Parkrun, or run between each and every stop on the Piccadilly Line. Now I could make 2020-21 my year to tick these off. It would start with a 50-mile run down the Union Canal from Leighton Buzzard to Brentford, on the 20th of November - my birthday - a solo ultra, just to prove I could still do such things.

Fifty at fifty, with every mini adventure described, ranked, and rated in my own guide to how to grow older disgracefully, most likely covered in mud, blood, sweat and tears. A midlife challenge, if you will, and not at all a crisis.

³ As we’ll see in chapters to come, this description of the challenge is not entirely accurate.

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Run 1: Festina Lente

The fence is eight feet high, with a keypad-operated locked door in its centre. It's fitted firmly against the wall on my left and extends a couple of feet out over the water of the canal. I use my headtorch to examine this barrier, since it is now fully pitch-black on the towpath. It looks impenetrable and is by far the most significant fence I've faced. Somehow, however, if I'm going to be true to my mission (as it seems like I must, since otherwise why am I here?) I must get over it. I am now beginning to regret my calculated act of trespass.

Ten hours previously, on Friday 20th November 2020, I woke at 4.45am, which is the sort of time I call 'farmer o'clock'. I set my alarm for 5am but somehow my body seems to know that it's vital I'm awake and able to face the challenges of the day with plenty of time to eat a full breakfast, drink some coffee and still make my 6.10am tube train and 6.50am train. I stumble blearily into the shower and use hot water to force my eyes open. It's dark outside and not even the birds are up.

Two hours later, I'm in the small, seemingly quite pretty Bedfordshire town of Leighton Buzzard, trotting down to the Union Canal beneath a glorious sunrise. I make a mental note to see more sunrises, then cross out that mental note, knowing myself too well. I am not a morning person.

The first thing I see when I reach the towpath is a fellow runner, a young man striding off in the direction of London, although I assume that he probably won't make it that far – only I am that crazed.

The day is cold and clear. Layers of white cloud, tinged salmon pink by the dawn, don't seem threatening so, after the requisite start line photos, I set off in my fair-weather gear, wearing one of the branded white caps I have left over from my first running adventure, my 2015 John O'Groats to Land's End run. I was 44 then, and I feel the intervening six

additional years in my leaden legs as I negotiate slippery runnels of thick mud on the grassy towpath banks.

Narrowboats are tied to their winter moorings in such abundance that I wonder if the realities of post-Covid-19 economics have forced a renaissance in boat-dwelling. Certainly, at 7.45am, many of them have their lights on, indicating that for some of these people, at least, barge-life is not a fair-weather pursuit. As the morning wears on, I'll often hear the chug of oil-fired generators or run through the sweet-smelling fog of woodsmoke issuing from the chimney stack of one of these floating homes.

In terms of strategy for this, my first challenge, I only want to reach Brentford in West London, where the canal ends, by 6pm. I'm having a Skype-call birthday, since the whole country is in lockdown now and in-person partying is out of the question. I need to be back home and presentable by 8pm, ideally. Sad to say, I've even bought two of those gold, inflatable number balloons, so I can ironically celebrate my 50 years on the planet. Plus, sunset is due at 4pm and I don't want to be running too many miles wearing my headtorch, particularly on the remote, more industrial stretches of the Grand Union Canal.

I can't say I'm feeling sprightly as I follow the canal's loops and straights, under a still impressive and lingering sunrise. In truth, I feel fat and under-trained. I just hope that my reserves of resilience will hold up when things get brutal, as they are bound to once I hit the marathon wall with 30 miles still to run.

Although its chilly, I'm not wearing gloves. I know I'll want to take pictures and that's next to impossible with the gloves on, since the rubberised tips that are designed to help you use your smartphone have all but worn away. Taking the gloves off and on for every photo would quickly become irritating. I settle for mild discomfort and the ability to stop for a quick snap and move on.

Fortunately, after fifteen minutes, my body has warmed

up, the muscles have thawed out and I've hit some sort of stride. I think I'm probably managing nine-minute miles, which is a shade too fast, while still shy of my normal long-distance pace. Having been running ultras for six years now, I know that 'pace yourself' is an instruction I'll fail to take seriously and, to be honest, it doesn't seem to work for me. My best ever marathon time (3:11:42) was obtained during a race where I threw sensible pacing out the window, running the first half in just under 83 minutes, then diminishing dramatically over the last 13 miles. My general attitude is 'if it feels good to run fast, then run fast,' which I admit will probably never lead to any race wins. But then I'm not really in it for that.

Which begs the question – why exactly am I choosing to run fifty miles on my fiftieth birthday? It is, by all accounts (I have some very honest friends) a crazy way to celebrate such an occasion. Why would I want to experience the vast swathes of excruciating pain that I know are heading my way? Perhaps just to prove to myself that I still have it, whatever 'it' is. If I'm to persevere with the constant struggle that is a meaningful and fulfilling life, then I need to do something regularly to prove to myself that I have the necessary staying power. This near double marathon should really kickstart my 51st year. It'll certainly be a birthday to remember.

Five miles out, I stop to photograph a remarkably modernist concrete underpass, which has an almost Le Corbusier elegance (or perhaps I'm already delirious). I'm planning to stop for some sort of rest and refuelling every two hours. I'll round off the hour and keep going until 10am, making the first stage little more than a routine long run. At this early hour, I pass few people and no runners (the young man at Leighton evidently an outlier). I begin to enjoy myself, running without music and determined to persist without tunes until I really need their distraction.

There's plenty to see with enough yellow and ochre leaves on the trees to give the day an autumnal, rather than wintery

feel. After only eight miles I've spotted ducks, geese, moorhen, squirrels, cows and even a small group of roe deer, who bound away across a neighbouring field as I approach.

If I wanted peace and solitude, the first part of my run offers plenty of both. I have a thing for lock-keeper's cottages and there are plenty of picturesque ones to admire and photograph. In reality, of course, such dwellings are probably plagued by damp, ill-suited to 21st century living and often far from convenient roads. I still think I'd love to live in one and, as I've never seen one for sale, I suspect I'm not their only fan. The lock gates, many dating back to the late nineteenth century, are in remarkable condition, a testament to the golden age of Victorian engineering. They are all numbered, and I use these rising numbers to mark my progress as I run.

The other useful indicators I keep an idle eye out for are the Braunston markers. When I start, these wrought-iron bollards inform me that I'm 47 miles from the notable Northamptonshire junction where the Union Canal meets the Oxford Canal. I recall seeing these mile markers when I lived in Ealing and regularly trained along the southern reaches of this waterway. I think the last of them was 96 or 97 miles from Braunston, which makes sense. I'll be able to keep track of my progress this way, which feels preferable to constantly consulting a running watch. I do have a Garmin GPS device in my backpack, happily ticking away the distance for posterity, although as it only pings out a positional signal every two minutes it will no doubt cut off a few loops of the canal, so I can't really trust it for accuracy. Fortunately, I've already measured my route on Mapmyrun.com and accounted for every contour.

Just after 9am I pass two small reservoirs where ducks dabble as a pair of quantity surveyors set up their dumpy levels⁴ on the towpath. Somewhere to my right is Tring, the

⁴ Believe it or not, this is appropriate terminology for the tripod-mounted viewing devices that measure how level a surface is.

starting point of the first ultra I ever encountered, the 40 (or 80) mile Tring to Town. Discovering this race first got me into the notion of running further than a marathon distance. I remember being amazed that runners in their forties and fifties could run 40 miles on a Saturday and then turn round and run the race in reverse the following day.

Somewhere around 9am I pass from Bedfordshire into Hertfordshire, the second of the three counties through which I'll run. There are no county markers on the towpath and so the moment goes without recognition.

After Tring, I realise I'll probably just make it to Berkhamsted in time for my first rest stop. I'm not slowing exactly, but my legs are feeling the extra effort after I hit the half marathon distance. I have previously run south from Berkhamsted, just once, whilst in training for my JOG-LE. The town has bittersweet connotations. Exceedingly pretty, with a convoluted history dating back 5000 years, the village was the site of the Anglo-Saxons surrender to William the Conqueror, following the Battle of Hastings.

Berkhamsted was also the site of a pub brawl I managed to get myself embroiled in (as a well-meaning bystander) between a lagered-up rugby fan whose team had just lost and two young hipster Americans. Unfortunately, this cultural combination resulted in a bloodied nose for the young Yank, as I and several other customers attempted to pull the bruiser off his victim. I learned two valuable lessons from this encounter. Firstly, some people take games of pool far too seriously. Secondly, never drink in a railway pub with sticky carpets.

I reach the outskirts of the village by 10.15am and am grateful to sit on one of the arms of a lock gate and consume some flavourless lentil crisps and a nutty granola bar. I rarely find I can eat much during a long run but given that I'd be burning around 7,000 calories, I'll have to attempt some refuelling. As well as the dry carbs I've brought a bottle of Lucozade Sport and half a dozen glutinous glucose gels.

Hardly a sumptuous birthday treat, but palatable in a crisis.

I set off fifteen minutes later and immediately feel the shock of traumatised muscles. It's as if my body thinks it's stopping for the day and has moved straight into rest and recuperation mode. I find it's tricky to manage more than a jogging pace to begin with as I distract myself by imagining how lovely it will be, post-COVID, to have a pint in one of the many canalside pubs I pass. One good thing about a pandemic is that it minimizes FOMO⁵ Nobody will be sitting enjoying a drink while I labour past them – not for a few months, at least.

While I wait for my legs to catch up with my ambitions, I pass more brightly painted and imaginatively named narrowboats – Alter Ego, Artful Dodger, Baltic, Sarah Rosie, and my personal favourite – Festina Lente. The Latin translates roughly as 'Hurry Slowly' and could be my personal ultrarunning motto. It's also the title of one my favourite tunes by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, a gloriously melancholy piece in which a melody is played by three different groups of string instruments at different speeds, falling in and out of synch with one another, leaving moments of near-silence and passages of shimmering glissando. I do feel a little melancholy being alone on my birthday, but I have only one pace modulation and it's getting slower by increments.

I'm distracted by the incongruous sight of a totem pole, which turns out to be a genuine Kwakiuti carving gifted by the Canadian people to a local timber yard owner. My attention is similarly diverted by the Three Horseshoes pub which goes straight into first place for canalside pubs in the competition I'm running in my head. My feeble pace is not helped when a ponytailed blonde hurls past me at a furious speed, or so it seems to me as I shamble along at 12-minute mile pace. I really ought to have trained for this.

⁵ FOMO = Fear of missing out, a truly 21st century city-dweller's affliction.

I am seeing more and more runners now, as the towns and villages become larger and more extensive. We're in prime London commuter belt territory and I'll hit Apsley soon, where a good friend once lived in a redeveloped narrowboat marina. Sensibly, she dwelt in a one bed flat, rather than a barge. More than one drunken evening was spent looking down from Tracy's balcony and people-watching as runners, cyclists and dog walkers passed by.

The canal skirts Hemel Hempstead, without making much contact with it, perhaps a blessing. A little after that I reach Kings Langley, a place I can't help hearing as 'King's Landing,' being a Game of Thrones fan⁶. There are no treacheries and intrigues here though, just the impressive art deco Ovaltine factory, now converted to flats, and the remains of a Roman Villa, the settlement being on the outskirts of St Alban's roman town, Verulamium.

I'd considered stopping at Kings Langley but I'm worried that my legs will seize up and I'll be reduced to walking the second half of my ultra. I decide to continue until 12:30pm and hopefully find somewhere with a bench to take my 'lunch.'

In the end, I run out of steam at Hunton Bridge, having passed under that symbolic landmark, the M25. I am now in the Greater London area, although that doesn't comfort me much, with two dozen miles left to run. As if by magic, I've stopped a marathon away from Leighton Buzzard and I feel every bit like a man who's just run 26.2 miles on insufficient training. I force down a couple of granola bars and some Lucozade and press on before rigor mortis sets in.

A little light drizzle begins to drift in, but as a Scotsman used to things being dreich, I declare it 'not serious rain' and forge on.

⁶ I later discover that, in 2014, as part of a publicity stunt linking to the DVD release of the show, the town actually did change its signage to King's Landing for a week, after an HBO producer got the idea by mishearing a station announcement.

As things become more worrying and more painful, I try to remind myself why I'm doing this. To slip momentarily into melodrama, I'm really trying to prove that I've got this aging process under control, rather than the other way round. I'm not just going to give in to middle age and become a disappointed slob. I'm going to fight and struggle to stay healthy, fit, and adventurous. Perhaps I'll even be able to find a lasting happiness along the way. That's quite a lot to ask of a fifty-mile yomp but I'm seeing this symbolic first run of my fifties as a kickstart to this principle of fighting back.

The sky has greyed over, and the rain is a little heavier now. There seems to be no possibility of achieving a decent pace as runners continually pass me. I realise I have less than three hours of sunlight remaining. If I can just reach the section of the canal I'm most familiar with – south from Uxbridge – then getting out the head torch for the last chunk won't be too bad. My speed, although dead slow, is still faster than my walk, so I keep it up. As long as I can still overtake a chugging narrowboat, then I'm doing okay. A couple of times during the run I get the opportunity to test this principle as a few hardy souls are out and about in their vessels, negotiating locks, heading to or from London.

I stop to photograph an unusually ornamental bridge, finished in a pale yellowish whitewash. This turns out to be the canalside entrance to The Grove, an estate belonging to a grand Georgian mansion, now converted into a luxury hotel. The Grove sometimes hosts international political conferences, including the G20 summit in 2009 and the 2019 NATO Leaders' meeting.

The great thing about a canal run is the lack of elevation change – it's easy to maintain an even pace if you're not constantly battling hills. Unfortunately, this is also one of the disadvantages of a canal run. The monotony of endless loops of flat towpath can be wearing. However, there's enough beauty and surprise on this stretch of the route to keep me pleasantly distracted. Soon I pass the converted remains of

the eighteenth-century Grove Mill with its distinctive yellow London stock brickwork. The four-storey structure once milled corn; now of course, it's apartments.

Beyond lies an exceptionally pretty stretch of gently looping canal, passing through the Grove's grounds and then Cassiobury Park, a 190-acre reserve created from the dissolution and sale of the Earl of Essex's Estate. As well as the lovely distraction of the remaining late-autumn leaves, which are a rich yellow and ochre hue, the park provides enough cover for a much-needed and surreptitious pee. I pass a floating coffee shop and am tempted to stop for one, but the darkening sky drives me on.

Soon a sign informs me that I'm a mile from Rickmansworth, about which I know little, except that one of my favourite cult authors, Douglas Adams, used it as the location of a revelatory moment for one young woman who, inspired by the example of Jesus, has an epiphany in a small café about how the world could be made 'a good and happy place'⁷. Unfortunately, before Fenchurch can put her plan into action, the Earth is destroyed to make way for a hyperspace bypass.

More optimistically, the sign also informs me that I'm somehow just seven miles from London. I assume this means from the outskirts of Greater London, or Uxbridge and don't allow myself to get too excited, since I'll then still have eleven miles further to reach Brentford and my final destination.

Narrowboat moorings proliferate on the next stretch. I admire their owner's ingenuity and pass several twentysomethings beavering away on DIY projects, replacing doors, sanding down decking, or painting their hulls. This being a Friday, it's quite likely a lot of these people are furloughed from their jobs, or worse. Or maybe they are just itinerant writer-directors like me, scratching out a living

⁷ Adams, Douglas "The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy", Pan Books, 1979

from dreams and tall stories. The bushes are decorated with lanterns and bird feeders and some of the narrowboats have even co-opted small bits of towpath to use as outdoor seating areas, or bicycle stores, which nobody seems to object to. Having lived for five months in a self-converted campervan, I can see much to envy in this lifestyle, even though I prefer the possibility of a speedy exit from any ill-chosen camping spot that Roxy (the Mazda Bongo) makes possible.

The canal now passes through a nature reserve, including the Springwell Reedbed, whose signs inform me is the largest reedbed in the London area. If I were knowledgeable in such things, I'd probably recognise the call of the reed warbler, which dwells here in large numbers. Bats are a common sight at night, skimming the reeds for a midnight snack of moths. If I were here an hour or so later, I might, if lucky, witness the murmuration of starlings throwing their morphing patterns across the evening sky.

The afternoon grows darker, danker, and quieter as I crawl gratefully into Uxbridge, seeing the familiar curving concrete façade of the Parexel Building, the local office of a pharmaceutical company specialising in clinical trials. I have a dim and distant memory of once applying to take part in a patch trial for some drug through Parexel, but not getting beyond the initial screening process, due to potential liver damage I'd suffered in my twenties⁸.

Exhausted, I stop by a bench and decide not to have a proper rest in case my legs seize up completely. It's considerably colder now that the sun has evidently gone down quite unceremoniously. I'm shivering a little and know that I must move on soon. I put on my running gloves (I'll cross the smartphone problem when I come to it) and a thick waterproof jacket and pull up the hood. Then I put my

⁸ A dreary and unconvincing 'cry for help' involving an OD of paracetamol. One night in the overdose ward in the hospital cured me of any further suicidal tendencies and although I've been intermittently 'down' for significant periods, I don't think I've been clinically depressed since.

running cap over the hood and attach my headtorch for later. I've probably got about 30 minutes of twilight and early dusk left, to make do without the torch. My phone is down to 10% power, so I plug it into a portable charger. I've only been using it for occasional music (which I resorted to over the preceding eight miles)⁹ and for photos, which I've uploaded to Facebook at each rest point. While I've been running, the occasional buzz of a text or message has registered on my upper arm, where I keep the holster that holds my phone. I can't answer any of them and just hope enough people know what I'm doing and don't assume I'm being rude by ignoring them.

I tear open a bag of Haribo Tangfastics, the delicious but insanely sugary sweets that seem to work almost as effectively as my glucose gels. These at least have the benefit of tasting half decent as I chew them down. A few swigs of Lucozade and I'm off. I'll admit that my diet is fairly dreadful during these long runs. I'm no Rich Roll or Scott Jurek (vegan ultrarunners).

As I pass through Uxbridge, it's almost weird to see city folk again, as well as red London buses and a few Christmas lights the town has strung along its iconic semi-circular bridge. I begin to feel a slight dread of encountering a gang of youths who might find it amusing to scare me or push me into the canal, but nothing of that nature happens. If anything, I'm the scary apparition lurching down the gloomy towpath, moving with all the pace and clan of a zombie. After a while, my shuffle becomes a walk with, I realise, no loss of pace. I hope I'll be able to run again before the end of the journey but, for now, a brisk walk is enough to maintain some semblance of progress. The familiar Braunston mile markers are now in their mid-eighties. I feel like I'm also in my mid-eighties, unfortunately.

At a couple of points earlier in the run I hit sections of

⁹ A self-curated Mike Oldfield compilation. At fifty I've given up trying to be fashionable or current in my listening.

towpath which were supposedly closed to pedestrians. I confess, I didn't take these very seriously, seeing no sign of improvement works in progress. There's no way of knowing when these temporary barriers were erected, and they show all the signs of being regularly ignored by locals. There are always ways to squeeze by so these barriers never posed any real impediment to forward progress.

Half an hour into my final session, however, I hit something more dramatic. Three sections of metal barricade, eight feet high and extending up the wooded bank to my left and out into the canal on the other side. It's now 4pm and the sky is pitch black. I have no idea what alternative route to take if I really can't run on the towpath. To lose this route would be a great shame. For the last three miles I've been skimming along hard-packed, gravelly tarmac, which has been great to run on. I weigh up the pros and cons of one more act of trespass. Top of the cons list is the possible embarrassment of encountering construction workers, which seems unlikely – it's pitch-black out now. There's also the possibility of hitting a barrier that's truly insurmountable and being forced to deviate in the middle of nowhere, perhaps somewhere where there aren't even runnable roads.

I find myself climbing the bank and edging round the last section of fencing. Minutes later, the freshly laid tarmac hemmed in by wooden siding gives way to gravel and I see sections of half-buried pipe off in a thin ditch to my left. This must be a combined cable-lay and restoration project; I begin to feel mildly guilty. Whereas my previous trespasses threw up no evidence of work of any kind, here I am leaving footprints in someone's project.

Fortunately, it's gravel underfoot, rather than wet concrete and there's no sign of anyone around. If this was a live site, I'd see working lights in the distance, so I keep an eye out. For the next forty minutes I encounter nothing but inky darkness and a part-complete surface that's still easier to run on than mud or grass.

I'm quite enjoying the certainty that I won't pass anyone at all on this stretch and I'm looking out for the familiar landmarks that I once used to mark off the miles on this semi-regular training route. Where are the two black sheds that seemed to have no purpose but to look scary? Where is the Nestlé factory? Where is the small packaging plant with the backdoor that workers emerge from to smoke?

There's absolutely no light, other than my head torch and the occasional bit of illumination from warehouses or local branch stations on the opposite bank. I have to look down frequently, to make sure I don't trip over the mooring ropes of industrial barges or patches of unworked ground. I'm delighted to find I suddenly have the ability to run again, neither fast nor gracefully, but maintaining around a 12-minute mile pace, somehow.

Then – inevitably – I reach the wooden fence described at the head of this chapter. Oops, I think. Have I finally met my match?

There's nothing for it but to be brave and resourceful. Grimacing with the effort, I use the horizontal joists behind the barrier to climb it, then dreep¹⁰ down the other side. I drop the last foot onto shaky legs and rejoice internally. Once again, I'm getting away with it!

I'm now in familiar territory as I run through Yiewsley and West Drayton, dodging puddles, where possible, but not really caring if I splash through mud now and again. I'm sure the soles of my feet are wrecked but I'm only in regular torment, not unbearable agony. I have shin splints to deal with, dull pain flashing up my right ankle, where I have a tiny bone deformity that rubs against the tissues. It's all endurable, with the finish line now just six or seven miles away.

The last section is a spooky trip down memory lane. I've not run this section after dark and am glad that it's a cold,

¹⁰ Scots for dangle by one's fingertips.

rainy evening and I don't have to startle too many unfortunates out on the towpath. I pass labourers returning home from work and cyclists weaving between the puddles, plus the occasional dog walker. I count down the landmarks – the humpback bridge, the overpass, the Toys-R-Us outlet.

A treacherous thought begins to form itself, encouraged by my exhaustion – I could stop at Elthorne Park. I could duck up those stairs and then run straight to the Underground Station at Boston Manor. My watch tells me its 6:30pm now and I'm supposed to be on my birthday Skype call, showered, fed, and rested, in ninety minutes. None of that seems likely to happen if I run all the way to Brentford. For now, I dismiss the thought and keep ticking off whatever familiar sights I can make out in the gloom.

After what seems a frustrating age of negotiating the endlessly muddy and rutted section near Southall, I reach the Three Bridges¹¹ junction at Hanwell where a road passes over the canal as it, in turn, surmounts the railway. The easily overlooked but impressive intersection was actually the last commission of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who died just two months after its completion in 1859. A ten-minute walk away, Brunel fans can also catch once of Brunel's first achievements, the Wharncliffe Viaduct, which carries the Great Western Railway across the River Brent¹².

I pass the old asylum site which still houses West London Mental Health Trust, then one of my favourite lock-keeper's cottages on the opposite bank, which comes with a large garden and boat dock. I'm just minutes from a possible exit via the Elthorne Park steps and yet, when I get there, still shuffling along at a slow jog, I keep going. As I commit to the last mile and a half, I have that strange, displaced feeling

¹¹ As technically, there are only two bridges, or rather, one bridge and an aqueduct, its formal name, Windmill Bridge, makes more sense. Around 1810, the artist J. M. Turner painted Southall Mill which once stood by the lock just west of the aqueduct. Sadly, there is no remnant of it now.

¹² The Brent joins the canal at Hanwell, necessitating flow control features further downstream.

of observing my decisions, rather than being the author of them.

There's a rather desolate significance to this route now, and one that still frightens me. On 28th August 2014, when I lived a few streets away, a fourteen-year-old, Alice Gross, went missing on her way to school whilst walking the same route I am now running. I remember the missing persons posters, and then the yellow ribbons tied to trees after her body was found in the Brent River six weeks later. The very next day, the corpse of her murderer, Arnis Zalkalns, a Latvian builder who'd previously spent seven years in prison for murdering his wife, was discovered hanging from a tree in nearby Boston Manor Park. It is likely he killed himself shortly after committing his crime.

My surroundings bring back gloomy memories of the mood of shock and sadness that passed through the local community in the weeks following the deaths. In most murders, there's someone to theoretically punish, even if they are never caught. In this tragic case, Alice's family were denied even that relief, since Zalkalns took that task upon himself.

I try to think of happier things as I complete my run – how good it will be to 'see' my friends on Skype later on, the remarkable fact of my achievement. As I round the last bend at 7:18pm and pass under the ramshackle old warehouse roof that still inexplicably covers part of the Brentford marina, I begin to feel the familiar rush of relief.

I've completed a remarkable challenge I'd set for myself for somewhat inscrutable reasons. It is a small triumph, significant only to me and there's nobody waiting at Brentford to share it with. Nevertheless, it feels important, a flag in the ground, a declaration of my ownership of a hopefully remarkable 51st year to come. Roll on, 2021!

DISTANCE COVERED: 50 Miles
TIME: 11 Hours and 31 minutes
AVERAGE PACE: 4.5mph
DIFFICULTY RATING: 8/10



Run 2: Totally Tubular

I wait four days before checking that my legs still function after the fifty-mile Union Canal run. Normally, I'd try a short, local hobble within two to three days, but I gave blood two days after my birthday, so it seemed unwise to challenge my body again so soon.

When I set out at 2:40pm this afternoon (24th November) it is a cold, crisp winter's afternoon. I've been on a work call since 2pm, keeping one eye on the dwindling light glinting through the blinds, worrying that I'll need a headtorch if I don't get out there soon. Fortunately, I make it out just in time, with about 90 minutes of usable light remaining. Technically, this gives me enough time to do a full 'three bridges' loop between West Kensington, Putney Bridge and Barnes Bridge. However, that will amount to almost ten miles, and I don't know if I have that sort of mileage in me. There isn't the possibility of running my preferred two bridge circuit, unfortunately, and for that, I blame the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. Bear with me – it does make sense.

Hammersmith Bridge has been out of commission since August. The 133-year-old cast iron masterpiece of Victorian engineering suffered sudden expansion in the preceding month, due in part to an unprecedented heatwave which saw temperatures soar to above 34°C (93°F) for six consecutive days. Its ancient frame was simply never meant for such extreme heat. I know exactly how it feels – my own summer runs have been red-paced, panting, endurance-fests.

Overnight almost, several dangerous cracks had appeared in the bridge's superstructure, detected by recently fitted sensors. Hammersmith and Fulham Council had no choice but to shut the bridge to both motor vehicles and pedestrians and apply for long-overdue restoration funding. On 24th

August 2020, H&F Council leader Stephen Cowan and neighbouring Richmond Council leader Gareth Roberts, together with TfL (Transport for London) petitioned the government for emergency funds. A 2015 estimate for a full restoration amounted to £46 million, a sum neither council had readily to hand.

Since then, traffic diversions have been causing major snarl-ups at Putney and other alternative river crossings. The many thousands of walkers and runners who use the bridge to access the leafy Richmond towpaths now must resort to their own arduous diversions. A six-mile loop has become a ten mile one, good for totting up the mileage, not so ideal for salving tired legs. While locals wait for the inevitable political horse-trading to run its course and the bridge to be made safe, it looks like we we're all stuck with at least a year of inconvenience.

Today I head past my old residence near the Queens Tennis Club (my basement flat was not as posh as this location suggests), down the ironically named Greyhound Road and by circuitous side-streets to the Riverside Café, where many of my Thames towpath runs start¹³. I now have a choice of either clockwise or anticlockwise, and opt for the former, because it means the low evening sun will be shining through the trees on my way down the Richmond-side towpath, which should be pretty. I often make my training run choices for purely aesthetic reasons.

I'm listening to Mike Oldfield again on my earphones (told you I was a geek), specifically another self-devised compilation of his longform instrumentals. Spotify on shuffle mode sets me off to the tinkling arpeggios of

¹³ If you ever want to run a solo marathon in London without being inconvenienced by traffic lights at any point, just start at the bench outside the restaurant and run west, across Hammersmith Bridge (when possible) then turn west again down the towpath and keep going until you reach the end of the promenade at Kingston. That's exactly 13.1 miles, so the return trip will amount to a full marathon distance. I discovered this in 2012 when that year's New York Marathon was cancelled due to Hurricane Sandy, and I decided to run the distance anyway.

Incantations Part One, then opts for Tubular Bells as I lope at eight-minute mile pace along the paving stones. As I dodge around the Crabtree pub's beer garden, and zig-zag early afternoon dog-walkers and cyclists, I feel remarkably good. Almost in that flow-state of idyllic running that occasionally descends, quite unexpectedly. The soles of my feet ache just a little and my right shin is hot with recent trauma, but nothing hurts, as such.

Entering Bishop's Park's leafy quietude, the familiar 7/8 theme of Oldfield's classic, as featured in *The Exorcist*, lends cinematic grandeur to the moment. I have a brief fantasy of being Father Karras from Friedkin's movie, in training to battle a demonic entity. The actor chosen to play the role, Jason Miller, certainly looked like he might run or box to get into shape for facing down the antichrist. Much of Tubular Bells isn't scary, however, tending towards folkie introspection or rock riffing. It seems a perfect choice as the chill, yet sunny afternoon provides the perfect conditions for a recovery run.

I have nothing to prove this afternoon except that my body can still quickly recover from even an extreme running challenge. In 2018, during my 2,300-mile run from Paris to Istanbul, I ran around 20 miles a day for 112 days. My poor body never had the chance to recover for more than a day before I forced it out onto the trail once more. Remarkably it adapted and endured. I can't be complacent, however; this may not always be the case. Age catches up with us all.

Strangely though, as I round the rose garden and turn at Putney bridge towards the tunnel and steps, I feel that the choice I'm now facing – turn back or carry on – is a simple one. With surprise I realise I'm entirely enjoying my run and don't want it to end. I head up the steps and over Putney Bridge, knowing I've now committed myself to almost twice the distance I would otherwise have covered.

Many visitors don't realise the Thames is tidal as far west as Teddington Lock. A high winter tide can flood the entire

road at Putney Embankment, stranding those who have foolishly decided to park there. Last time I ran this way, heading in the reverse direction, I'd already waded through a wet half mile at Hammersmith and decided to divert onto the main road to avoid a shimmering lake that filled the entire roadway.

Fortunately, the tide is fully out today and at 3pm, there aren't too many people to negotiate (my personal running bugbear is pedestrians who don't seem to have heard of the concept of single file). I'm still running well and am grateful to feel the varied textures and surfaces of the towpath under my aching feet as it meets the embankment just beyond the rowing clubs' sheds and boat stands. I don't even appear to have slowed, judging by the number of joggers I pass. If anything, my pace has quickened.

Where exactly is this energy coming from? Partly perhaps from the copious quantities of Orkney Fudge I've consumed over the last four days, a birthday gift from my parents, who know my sweet-toothed proclivities all too well.

Halfway to Hammersmith Bridge I stop to take a photo of the low evening sun glimmering through the few remaining autumn leaves. Somehow, in putting my phone back in its pouch, I trigger a replay on Tubular Bells, and it begins again. Oh well, I think, another chance to channel Father Karras.

The section between Hammersmith Bridge and Barnes Bridge is picturesque and I soon pass a bench which is one of my favourite places to sit and read a book, by an open slipway that gives an unobstructed view of Chiswick Mall on the opposite bank.

My thoughts are drifting pleasantly and unselfconsciously as I progress towards Barnes. My feet aren't suffering unduly yet either. When I embarked on this longer run, I was worried the sun might have set before I reached the unlit section on the opposite bank, at Dukes Meadows. As I get closer to breaking from the footpath onto the embankment at Barnes,

this clearly isn't going to be a problem. I must be flying along. I feel a niggles of regret that I didn't bring any water with me but I'm not even perspiring all that much, so not even this oversight presents much difficulty.

The golden hour beloved of cinematographers is one of my favourite times of day to run. The glorious amber light you get on clear days when the sun is an hour from setting easily makes up for how few sunrises I experience. At times, the sun gleams at me through the branches like a lantern. I emerge from the trees onto the tarmac and am stopped in my tracks by a sunset of staggering beauty – puffs of orange cloud against an aquamarine sky, beneath which a ball of fire descends, silhouetting the iron arches of the foot- and rail bridge. This is why I run, I think, for the umpteenth time.

Mere minutes later, I weave past pedestrians along the pavement by Gustave Holst's house and vow, as I always do, to listen to his Planet Suite sometime. It seems appropriate, given the celestial magnificence going on overhead. Then, it's a quick trot over the footbridge and down to Dukes Meadow, where kids are ambling home from school. Spotify now gives me the start of side two of Tubular Bells, which is perfectly suited to the bucolic evening chill – spectral and impressionistic.

The Thames Towpath, a national trail, was first proposed in 1948 but only opened up along its full length in 1996. Remarkably, it is 184 miles long and runs between Kemble in Gloucestershire and the Thames Barrier at Charlton. I have a plan, sometime soon, to run the full length of it, probably over four or five days. For now, I'm content to enjoy the familiar stretches I must have run over one hundred times.

I pass the arts and crafts inspired bandstand and shelters (built in 1926) and stick to the lower gravel path, rather than the grass terraces which run parallel. I'm gratified to pass another runner and, as ever in these encounters, I speed up slightly in passing, as if to discourage a race. The sun is

burning out in a blaze of crimson glory behind me, and I make haste past the elegant homes and gardens of Chiswick Mall, another commonly flooded stretch. I reach William Morris's house, another local attraction I've yet to visit and make the perennial mental note to rectify this.

Then it's a quick dart past the Grade II listed, eighteenth-century public house, The Dove, where local notables including Graham Greene, Dylan Thomas, Ernest Hemingway, and the aforementioned Mr Morris once drunk. As did Dick Turpin, allegedly. And James Thomson, who is thought to have penned *Rule, Britannia* there. A London run is ever a high-speed tour of history and the random associations of culture.

I stop for a final photo by the houseboats near the bridge, turning back to capture a vividly red and purple sky. Then I turn off before the bridge and make my way back home by Hammersmith Broadway and leafy side-streets. When I complete my customary sprint finish and stop by the electrical junction box opposite Sainsbury's it is 4:15pm and I have managed, with a pleasurable ease, 9.79 miles. I'm dumbfounded by how easy and enjoyable my recovery run has been. Best of all, *Tubular Bells* reaches its miasmic conclusion the second I reach my front door, so that the *Sailor's Hornpipe* coda becomes the comic counterpoint to my climbing the stairs to collapse upon the bed in my flat. Mission most assuredly accomplished, thanks, in no small part, to Mr Oldfield's magnum opus.

DISTANCE COVERED: 9.79 Miles

TIME: 1 Hours and 19 minutes

AVERAGE PACE: 7mph

DIFFICULTY RATING: 4/10

Run 3: Richmond Ring

Somewhere in the second decade of the twenty-first century¹⁴, I had a training run like no other. As I've mentioned, I'm not really a morning person, so it's highly unusual that I got here, at the gates of Richmond Park, before dawn, on a chilly October morning.

My then girlfriend dropped me off, having an 8am start at work in nearby Kingston. Unusually, I agreed to her request to come with her, persuaded by the argument that it would be a great chance to get an early morning training run in. Thirty minutes later I stood blinking in the chilly air, my breath frosting before me as I urged my tired legs into action. The sky was dark blue, with a suggestion of imminent dawn and just enough light to see the gravel path down into the park to my left. I didn't think about bringing a head torch but was reasonably convinced that the sun would rise before I reached the gloomy forested section about a mile along the path.

When I reached the trees, a glimmer of sunlight had turned the sky a deep russet red behind the almost-bare branches. I huffed up a woody incline and heard an unusual sound – the unmistakable clash of bone on bone. As I rounded the hill, I saw two stags – red deer I think – their antlers entangled, trying to force one another back like Sumo wrestlers. One stag disengaged, reared up, and charged once more. Their impressive branching antlers clattered against one another, and the animals snorted out goutts of hot breath.

The sight was almost hyperbolic in its beauty and neither animal paid me the slightest heed as I slowed to watch, then continued, not wanting to disturb this vital mating ritual. These animals had been striding the park's landscape, rutting, and raising families, for almost 400 years. I was a curiosity, an interloper. I felt absolutely vindicated in my uncharacteristic decision to run dawn loops of the park. Despite this, the dawn Richmond run was not an experience I'd ever repeat.

Today, seven or eight years later, I've set myself a challenge I've not faced in a good while. I'll run along the river towpath to Richmond, then climb the hill to the Star and Garter Home, now being developed as (surprise, surprise) luxury flats, and run a full circuit of the deer park. This should amount to about 16 miles in total. I know this because it's a route I once regularly ran in training for my first ultra (the London to Brighton 100k), and at that time I lived only ¼ of a mile from my current apartment.

I'm looking forward to the second portion of the run especially, as I have a lot of memories associated with the Richmond Park loop, my seven-mile circuit of the historic deer park¹⁵. I first trained there in 2014 while preparing to run the length of the UK, loving the fact that I could run for miles and miles unimpeded by traffic lights or cars (the few roads that traverse the park are easily crossed).

First, I must contend with sluggish legs and a slight chill in the air as I attempt to warm up on the familiar route to Hammersmith Bridge. As it's still closed, and will be for months, if not years, I'll take Chiswick Mall as far as Barnes Bridge and cross over the Thames there. I'm beginning to regret not bringing my sunglasses as it's quarter past one and the sun is already low in the west. There are loose piles of cumulous clouds but regular gaps between them allow the sun to blaze directly into my eyes as I negotiate the surprisingly dense throng on the Mall.

Now that I'm fifty, perhaps I have earned the right to become considerably grumpier when encountering recalcitrant pedestrians. I know I don't own the road, as a rare runner amongst the amblers, cyclists, and dog-walkers, but couldn't people use at least a modicum of common sense when they see me coming? I have even developed terminology for the most annoying tendencies of non-runners:

TRAWLERS: these are the groups of four or more friends who seem determined to spread out in a long line, perpendicular to the direction of travel, blocking as much of the pavement as possible.

ERRATICS: zig-zagging pairs or individuals whose trajectories can't easily be mapped. Many of them are staring fixedly at their phones.

REFUSENIKS: these couples seem to be so utterly inseparable that the very notion of single file is anathema to them. If you're lucky, one will lean in against the other as you edge past, allowing a last-minute, shoulder-brushing, pass.

Somehow, having these and other nicknames makes the process of ducking and weaving through the

¹⁴ I'm not being coy here, I'm genuinely not sure when this happened. It almost feels like a dream memory now. But I think I was dating an optometrist who worked in Kingston, and that dates the memory to around 2012-2013.

¹⁵ The park was created by Charles I in 1625 as a deer park and an escape from plague-stricken London. I guess I'm running there in my own attempt to leave the house while minimising risk of infection.

afternoon crowds more pleasurable. It's like a moving obstacle course, with the added frisson of invisible (and hopefully imaginary) gusts of COVID-19¹⁶ to contend with.

Once more I'm listening to Mike Oldfield. I seem to be in a phase. For me, his long, symphonic rock albums are comfort music, reminding me of my teenage years when I walked, rather than ran, exploring the Pentland Hills to the south-west of Edinburgh. I hope to fit in some Pentland Hill-running in 2021. For now, I listen to Taurus II and my inner lonely teenager, who never fully healed from his mental strife, gains succour. Conveniently, the track is 24:45 minutes long, so I know I'm running a good pace – it ends just as I reach the entrance to Duke's Meadow, three miles from my flat.

The nine miles to Richmond constitute a familiar route I've run many times. In the pre-COVID-19 summers it would invariably end with a sprint finish by the White Cross pub, a restorative pint and then a shivering walk to the station to catch the District Line home.

Today, the lovely riverside pub, whose front yard can flood with up to a foot of water during high tides, is merely a passing landmark in a greater mission – to see if my legs are up to the task of sixteen miles without losing significant pace. I'm using Strava to map my route and speed. Unfortunately, during one of my occasional photo stops, I accidentally pause the app and it fails to record anything after the first seven miles. When we over-rely on technology, disappointment is inevitable.

It rained heavily recently, so I'm kept busy puddle-jumping as I squelch along the southern towpath, past the riverside car park for Kew Gardens and out alongside the stately gardens. As ever, I feel a pang of jealousy not to be merely ambling through the trees with the other Sunday afternoon visitors, but this quickly passes as I realise I'm enjoying the run and feeling absolutely no discomfort at all. I lift my feet high on the more knobbly sections since I've fallen here and winded myself before. I have a strange slow-motion memory of plummeting without any ability to arrest my fall whatsoever.

Soon I'm running alongside Syon House, which glows with a vanilla ice-cream sheen, catching the sunlight on the opposite bank. Nearing Richmond, I see two odd obelisks in the Old Deer Park (not to be confused with the 'new' 17th century one up the hill). I have no idea what they commemorate, and it seems strange I've never seen them before, despite running this way at least 50 times before¹⁷.

I make a conscious effort *not* to attempt my customary sprint finish at Richmond. So far, so good, I think as I continue past gaggles of geese and pedestrians, pushchairs, buskers, and cyclists weaving amongst the throng.

Beyond the arches where boatbuilders work, warmed by fingerless gloves and Capital FM, after the depressingly quiet riverside restaurants, I reach the little park where my 'secret' short-cut lies. It's not really secret, but I imagine that few people ever spot the tiny arched tunnel that runs under Petersham Road and carries me from Buccleuch¹⁸ Gardens to the sloping and more elegant Terrace Gardens. I'm now nine miles into my run and this is where it starts to get tricky.

The formal gardens break onto the sloping meadow between the river and Richmond Hill. One of my absolute favourite drinking establishments lies at its top – the Roebuck – where those in the know take their drinks out onto the benches on the other side of Richmond Hill Road, to bask in the spectacular view. After I stagger, breathless, to the benches that line this viewpoint, I turn and look at a beautiful S-bend of river, flanked by trees and seemingly leading out into nothing but forested countryside. I think of this as the best view in London, although of course it's not London I'm looking at, but Surrey in all its splendour. Even in winter, it's vividly pastoral. But I have no time to tarry over a pint.

Running past the imposing Star and Garter Home, designed by Sir Gilbert Giles Scott as a convalescence home for ex-servicemen and opened in 1924, I enter the Park proper. I've caught my breath and am grateful the first mile or so is entirely downhill. Signs proclaim a 10mph limit, a warning I have no trouble heeding (although the average Kenyan marathoner would fall foul of this restriction). I'm guessing this is probably intended for the few Royal Parks support vehicles that patrol, as well as mountain bikers who tend to shoot past at terrifying speed.

My circular route is punctuated by car parks and roads which segment the interior into a kind of pie chart. The first couple of wedges are easy enough, and my feet enjoy the varied terrain and changing inclines after so many miles on level gravel paths. Two miles in, at Roehampton Gate, there's a large car park with café and, seemingly, a Christmas tree shop. Families are busy choosing their tree and I'm glad that, in this chaotic

¹⁶ If you're reading this long after the defeat of the COVID-19 Coronavirus, you may have managed to forget that 2020 was derailed by a pandemic which, at time of writing, killed over 63,000 Britons.

¹⁷ Apparently, they are meridian marks set there to help orientate telescopes in the 18th century observatory which once stood in the Old Deer Park.

¹⁸ A Scottish name which is pronounced Buck-Loo, and probably pertains to some Duke or other.

and distressing year, the festive season is still going ahead. Moments later I cross the decorative arched wooden bridge over Beverley Brook, whose name suggests a 1970s school headmistress (or perhaps a Diana Dors era movie star?)

I'm now on a long, slightly boring stretch which undulates seemingly for miles before the first real landmark – the Yellow Hill. I find myself running behind a young woman with a bobbing ponytail and I realise I'll probably catch and overtake her in an awkwardly narrow stretch, so I stop to take a photo of the setting sun throwing orange hues against the clouds, behind the gnarly tree fringes. There are no deer at all in sight; I wonder if they are hibernating or merely sticking to the park's interior, avoiding the many humans availing themselves of this refreshingly sunny December Sunday?

The Yellow Hill (properly Broomfield Hill) is my name for the only significant incline on this route. In ultrarunning, it's not so much the distance you have to climb, as the degree of the slope, which makes you judge whether the hill before you constitutes a 'walker' or not. I have no intention of walking any of today's sixteen miles, so I take some photos of my foe and maintain a steady pace past hikers and bikers who are enjoying a steady descent. The yellow colour comes from the clay beneath my feet, which holds the indentations of temporary streams caused by foul weather. Nothing can erode away my 400m nemesis, though. It's comparatively short, but after a dozen miles, the 30% incline completely robs me of my breath and pace.

However, I make it to the top without walking and secure in the knowledge that there's nothing like it to come. The sun is now low in the sky and throwing Irn Bru-orange light all around. I'm still fairly sure I can make it to my endpoint at Petersham Road with plenty of light in reserve, but I can't slacken off now. I'm still enjoying the run, remarkably, even when the other side of Broomfield Hill, the leaf-strewn muddy curve that arcs down to Kingston Gate, seems impossibly far off. Somehow, I always underestimate the duration of this stretch.

Eventually, as a truly glorious red-orange sunset fills my sight, I get my reward, and feel the muscle groups change as I run downhill, although my usual fast pace here is arrested by the need to take several photos of the flaming sky. After I cross the final road at Ham Gate, I'm on the home straight, a hard-packed gravel path that climbs gently to the meadow beneath Sawyer's Hill. In theory, to complete a perfect loop, I could stagger up the thick mud of the hill and continue to the Star and Garter again, but it seems unnecessary and there's a public loo beside the kids play area that I usually visit. Sixteen miles is surely enough, I think, doing my usual demonstrative stride down the hard-packed clay path to my finish point.

A line of 'trawlers' has to be negotiated during my sprint finish. I use my not-so-subtle strategy of thumping my feet down with extra vigour so that two of the group turn round to see me bearing down on them and prepare a small gap for me to blast through. I reach the undistinguished sapling which marks my finish-line, grabbing hold of the anti-deer fence around it and tipping my weight off my heels while I catch my breath.

I make to stop my Strava and curse when I realise that it hasn't recorded anything beyond Kew. Never mind. I refuse to allow myself to be obsessed with pacing and split times. This run has been about recapturing the spirit of optimism I had before my first ultra-running adventures, and as I hobble into the toilet block, I feel completely vindicated. For a fifty-year-old, today's run, completed in a time of 2 hours and 28 minutes, is entirely adequate. A long walk to the train station awaits me, and a long and indolent evening lie ahead. I'll feel no guilt whatsoever for doing nothing with the rest of my day.

DISTANCE COVERED: 16 Miles

TIME: 2 Hours and 28 minutes

AVERAGE PACE: 9.2mph

DIFFICULTY RATING: 6/10