

## The Plan

20 miles.

The final prep for the next marathon, three weeks hence.

Run along the river greenway, first left headed east for 1.5 miles.

Back to the car, shedding the running pants, gathering up the water bottle and the gels.

Then, 8.5 miles to the right into the west and the slowly rising mid-fall rising morning sun.

Turn around atop the only true hill, next to the house with the never ending bark from the dog.

The dog who is ceaseless in protecting his turf, barking from the back door deck.

Then running each mile back at a faster pace than the one before it.

A nice progression run, good for the legs and the soul.

It was a good plan, a great plan, a shrewd use of training.

And, it remains a good plan for another marathon training block.

Remember, all plans are written in pencil.

If you don't know why, you'll learn.

The Seaside Marathon in an Olympic year.

Mid-February in the Northwest.

Cool, damp, and cloudy, run amidst the endless evergreens.

No wind.

We drove down from Seattle to run the Sunday marathon.

Seven of us crammed into a two-story cabin with a loft for the weekend.

We acquired our race numbers at the expo.

Dining out at the only Italian restaurant in the small town, we ate heartily.

Race morning, tummies contented with peanut butter sandwiches, we jogged to the start line.

Two of our tribe, me included, decided running the first 18 miles all out was a grand idea.

That idea lasted 18 miles and then faded into oblivion.

All those racers we had passed in the first two-thirds of the race, now passed me.

With each runner that passed by, my hunger grew.

No water stops. No aid stations. No nutrition. I was screwed.

The course turned into a subdivision and my luck changed.

Walking out of her house, down her sloped driveway was the woman of that house.

Box of donuts in her hands.

She set that box down on the trunk lid to her car, just as I was passing.

"Um, could I have one of your donuts?"

She looked over, smiled, and nodded yes.

"Could I have two?"

My mouth stuffed full of sugar and donut cake, I thanked her profusely, trudging off.

The donut effect lasted to mile 21.

Down the long stretch to the promenade along the beach, a kid came out from his house.

He was carrying a cheese and baloney sandwich.

He saw me coming towards his part of the street, waved and cheered me onwards.

I eyed his sandwich.

"Do you want a bite?" he asked.

“Do you have a whole one,” I requested.  
He flew into the house just as I was passing his lawn.  
He flew back out, breathless, holding another sandwich, his mother in tow.  
He ran down to the street, handing me both the sandwich and a napkin.  
I took both.  
“Thank you!” I exclaimed, looking at his mother.  
High-fiving him, I snarfed the sandwich, continuing my running.  
I finished.  
Broke three hours.  
Toughed it out.  
Not bad for a foolish race plan.  
Just seconds behind my compatriot.  
We celebrated, sharing stories from along the way.  
Finding the others, we descended upon a pizzeria, eating our way through the afternoon.  
The donuts and that sandwich both tasted better than the pizzas heaped with everything.

4.17 miles into my 20-miler, feeling smooth and under control.  
Turned into the curve leading to the three-legged footbridge that allowed passage over river.  
It was closed with three dudes steam-cleaning the railings, steam flying into the frigid air.  
Closed.  
Closed?  
Closed!  
How the hell closes a footbridge on a Saturday morning at 7 a.m.?  
What. The. Hell.  
More importantly, how do I get across the river to complete my run’s out portion?  
Which way to I go?  
How do I avoid the highway?  
And what about Naomi?  
Trudging back to the nearest trailhead, I climbed up to the road.  
Turning towards the obvious route, I slithered in disgust to the highway.  
Luckily, there was a sidewalk and I avoided the cars excessively exceeding the speed limit.  
Reaching the other side of the river, turning back to a connecting greenway, I resumed the pace.  
Until 12.32 miles into the 20-mile run.

Running to the top of the hill, the dog barking its presences with authority, I paused.  
Downed my gel with a lengthy swig from the water bottle.  
Waved to the dog.  
Trundled down the hill, letting the pace pick up with the help of gravity.  
My pace quickening every mile from that point, the progression goal in sight.  
Until I came to the three-legged footbridge.  
There was no sight of a closed sign.  
I hit the middle, turning towards the finishing stretch.  
They only moved the sign.

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Defeated, I headed back to the highway overpass.  
20 miles became 23, with a 30-minute walk tacked on.  
That's too much time to think.  
Don't use no earbuds.  
Don't listen to music when running.  
I have too many voices in my head.  
No room for extraneous music.  
Did you know that cars travel faster and louder later in the morning and into the afternoon?  
I did, too.  
That crescendo ends all thought.  
Except for the one that repeats: Mr. Wizard, get me off of this highway!  
Four hours of running and walking.  
Those hours taken up with hopes, dashed hopes, lack of any hope.  
No progressive pacing.  
No inner strength demonstrated in sucking it up in getting back to the car.  
No endorphins for me.  
Just the loneliness of the long distance runner.

The thing about an out and back course is that you can get back.  
The other thing about an out and back course rudely interrupted is the time taken in returning.  
That latter thing can add a long time to the run.  
A long time to think, go through the emotional ladder, and just generally be miserable.  
You forget you have the trained ability to run that far.  
All those prior days of training allows you to do this day.  
This day that just sucks.  
You dishonor that you are running through miles 0 to 23.  
Each mile a test of your resolve, pace be damned.  
Each mile's pace being less than ideal.  
You ignore the next day when you awaken without any body ache or lethargy.  
Already contemplating the next week's runs, itching to get out the door, again.  
The look forward, built from the past.  
Today, I rest.  
Tomorrow, I lace up the training shoes, head out for a pronounced easy run.  
The next day, I'll run a bit longer.  
The day after that, I'll run a faster run, sustained in pace, reigning in the horses.  
Next weekend, I'll run not quite as far as this weekend's run.  
On a course that is never closed for repair.  
Making chicken salad out of chicken crap is a learned process.  
Just like using a pencil.