

There's a Man With a Gun . . .

Two men stood at a bus stop, waiting for one to come heading towards Downtown San Francisco's Financial District. With time on their hands and the bus not yet arrived, the first man struck up a light conversation with the second one. The first man was a tourist from the Los Angeles Area, taking in the sights of "Frisco" as he put it to the second man. San Francisco was both where the second fellow lived and worked, as he explained to the visitor, the bus now in view.

When the bus reached their stop, the visitor went first, stepping towards a seat on the bus before looking back, expecting the local resident to join him. Looking at the tourist, the resident stepped away from the bus, stating his intention to wait for the next one. He then turned his gaze towards the tourist, saying, "It's not Frisco; it's named San Francisco, and we call it, THE CITY." Enjoy your visit."

To my foolish surprise, I've raced more races in the City than any other town I have lived. No matter the distance, from 5km, five-milers, 10km, 10-milers, half marathons to a marathon, the City has provided the backdrop for some personal-best races. Unless the race is along the Embarcadero, a race in the City is not flat, but man, it's fun. I'd race there, again, if I still lived local.

April 15, 1967. Lined up on Lombard Street, stretching up towards Van Ness Avenue, the demonstration against the Vietnam conflict wove its way through the streets through the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park to Kezar Stadium, where the protesters filled the stadium. San Francisco has a long history of anti-war protests, particularly during the Vietnam War era. Large demonstrations, some drawing hundreds of thousands of participants, took place in San Francisco, including marches to Kezar Stadium and Civic Center Plaza. It was a young people's demonstration. My mother was young. 27 years old, she toted her three young children to the event. I was the oldest, aged eight. I played at the edge of Kezar Stadium's football field.

Those in control of the City were not pleased. Though the City's mayor was liberal, the authorities were hostile to the anti-war protest, ordering the police to stop any disturbance – for any reason – before, during, or after the protest. Mama got arrested, all of us in tow, for standing on a street corner in the Haight-Ashbury District next to

the Park. Her boyfriend, later my stepfather, took her children home. With the guidance of the Judge, the charges were later dropped, a better story for another day.

April 24, 1971. They came that day to the City by the hundreds, marched by the tens of thousands, 250,000 or more walking down the straight section of Lombard Street and into Golden Gate Park. They wanted the Vietnam conflict over. They wanted their sons, friends, brothers, to come home, alive. They tired of the rhetoric and the body count on the nightly news. They wanted better for America.

They brought their voice, their songs, their signs. My mother again brought us. I was a young vet of those marches. Now 12, I walked briskly with the demonstrators, knowing that my stepfather could be sent to Vietnam, depending on where his draft number came up in the lottery. Focused discussion of moving to Canada came up often at home. The demonstration ended at the Polo Grounds. I played solo catch in the adjacent grove, listening to the speeches, enjoying the music.

The City's police activity was less hostile than before. America now wanted out of Vietnam and out of empire building. Not every country's political change led to Communism. Funny thing was, we had walked Lombard to the Park. We had to walk back the way we came. 250,000 people trudging the return route, almost all were giggling, either from being high, or realizing the folly of a one-way protest. But that's not today's story.

July 8, 1979. Golden Gate Park is sufficiently large to host its own 26.2-mile marathon course. I know because that was the route of my second marathon, sponsored by the Pamakids Running Club. I wore my go-to race shirt, a soft, velvet feeling to the touch short-sleeved cotton shirt with a Perrier logo, earned from a 10-miler in the Park a year prior, a race in which I chased two running friends for the first nine miles, before passing both and running 5:45 per mile pace for each mile. I held a small wake when I had to part ways with that shirt.

In the marathon a year later, I broke three hours for the first time, running in the Park for three long loops that were each so different from one another, going up and down, repeatedly, before the course took us out the Great Highway, around Lake Merced and the Fleishhacker Zoo, running the return to the Park on the Great Highway, the finish in the Polo Grounds of the Park. I was young, so I didn't appreciate how hilly was the course. I had a goal and achieved it.

I can recall those multiple loops in the Park, with the numerous turns onto and through the roads rarely used to larger roads that normally held traffic. Of course, this marathon was raced on a Sunday, and the main roads are closed to auto traffic on Sundays. There were roughly 3,000 runners. It was my first mega-race. Smartly planning a faster second half, I held back, checking the time on my thin Casio running watch to every mile split. Breathing in the eucalyptus leaves' aroma with the marine air coming off the ever-present Pacific Ocean air, there was a constant freshness in the air's essence. The pace was so easy.

In the second half, run both in and out of the Park, I began passing large swaths of runners who would finish behind me. I recall changing shoes, feeling supercharged and bouncy, the last 10km a blur, knowing I could go under 6:51 per mile if I could just hold it together. For the first time – but not the last – I ran the most challenging part of the marathon with self-confirmed elation, my smile at the finish becoming the day's expression. It was a top three marathon for me.

Post-race, looking for a Pepsi, my companions and I walked from the Park down Lombard Street, down and back up the crooked part of Lombard, back to the Park, and then to a very hearty post-race meal. My memory is that I slept a long, long time in a hard, deep peace. That race taught me that a long, post-race walk was good item to add to my marathon training. But that's not today's story.

May 19, 1996. The City is seven miles wide and seven miles long. The annual Bay to Breakers race is 7.5 miles, stretching from the Embarcadero, through nine of the City's district, up Hayes Street, with a long, long finish through Golden Gate Park and on the Great Highway finish. The extra half mile comes from getting to the Hayes Street hill and the meandering main road through the Park, and the final Great Highway finishing stretch alongside the Pacific Ocean.

I had convinced my girlfriend that we could run the race. Because I was a runner, she had dabbled occasionally in running with me. We both lived in the East Bay's hot interior, she working in the City and me working in the East Bay. Spring in the City has nicer weather than in the East Bay, so convincing her to run this race for fun wasn't a hard sell.

And we did have fun. We found her race pace, enjoyed the centipede teams passing us, sniggering at the occasional naked runners we witnessed. There were a lot of both. Assuring her that once we got up and over the Hayes Street Hill, the course was flat and slightly downhill the last four-plus miles. Once we crested the two-thirds of a mile uphill into the Panhandle, she got her legs back. Cruising down the long, gentle incline that is John F. Kennedy Drive from the Panhandle and through the length of the Park, I realized she'd found her running groove. Every mile was faster than the one before.

Just before we turned out the Park, onto the Great Highway, crossing the finish line, I instinctively knew she was building to a finish-pace sprint. She'd mentally done her own race arithmetic. I'd been too many sprints and sprint finishes to count. I knew what was coming. Crossing the seven-mile mark, she accelerated, catching a step on me before I could react. This moment is not in the Gentlemen's Handbook.

I caught up but I did not pass her. Her vision was the large finish line banner. Nothing else. Young, lithe, and secure in her stride, she pushed her pace even faster. Now in my race groove, comfortably racing aside her, I settled into the momentary respite before the final lunging sprint I knew was coming. And, come it did.

No matter that we raced under an average 8:00 per mile for 7.5 miles. Forget that we broke an hour for a race that year had almost 75,000 runners. In those last race-paced strides to the finish, she nudged just past me, getting just enough ahead of me to forever know she won our little race within the Bay to Breakers. She chicked me.

Luckily, I had the foresight to pack a lot of folded bills and a wrapped in a plastic lunch bag credit card, in case she didn't want to wait for a bus to take us back downtown. She didn't. we shared a sweat-filled cab with another young couple, changed at her office, had lunch in North Beach, walked hand in hand to BART and out of the City. We later married, but that's not today's story.

June 22, 2025. Within me there is the possibility of racing another marathon, not merely completing one. At this age, racing means qualifying for the Boston Marathon. Not certain that can happen. The mind is willing. Whether the body wants to join in is the unknown. Getting there will be the story.