

A woman with blonde hair tied back, wearing a maroon t-shirt, black shorts, a black cap, and a large backpack, is crossing a shallow, rocky stream in a lush jungle. She is wearing blue gloves and has a white stick or pole in her hand. The water is splashing around her legs. The background is filled with dense green foliage and moss-covered rocks.

How Not to Run

WELCOME TO
THE JUNGLE

SHAUNEY WATSON

The **PITCH** Report

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How Not to *Run* WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

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Chapter One

Lost in the Jungle

*Manu National Park, Peru
June 2022*

DARKNESS SEEMED to swoop across the sky far faster than I had noticed before, casting the Peruvian rainforest into silhouettes at first, and then into nothing but black. The sweat running down my back, stomach, face and neck turned cold and clammy almost instantly. Rising fear was chewing at the back of my throat and swirling in my stomach.

Oh god, I really am lost.

The thought seemed to bounce around every crevice of my mind; I couldn't comprehend it. I pulled my head torch over the top of my baseball cap and switched it on. Thick branches had closed overhead again and the dirt track was pitted with puddles. They were nothing compared to the rivers and swamps I had encountered over the last five days but I was so sick of wet feet that I skirted round

a particularly deep one. My legs brushed through the undergrowth that was spilling over the track. Something made a rustling noise and darted out my way. Given the plethora of deadly animals and insects I knew only too well were lurking nearby, I hastily stepped back on to the track; maybe the puddles were preferable after all. I scanned ahead of me and found my head torch light bouncing off a shining pair of eyes. They quickly disappeared. I could hear my heart starting to thud in my ears. Branches creaked and leaves rustled overhead as something heavy crossed from tree to tree above me. The pain in my feet, legs, shoulders and back seemed to vanish as adrenaline started pumping into every square inch of my body. And then, as though written for a movie, my head torch that had withstood five days of jungle humidity started to flicker, its battery sputtering out the last of its power.

Chapter Two

A New Obsession

Four years previously

NEPAL. IT had been everything. My sole focus and daily drive for two years had been to reach Everest Base Camp and run *that* race. The highest 26.2 miles in the world. Despite many things going wrong, not least falling foul to food poisoning the very night before the race itself, I did it. I did the two weeks of acclimatising in freezing night temperatures, soaring day temperatures, barely enough oxygen to keep going, with a less than adequate sleeping mat, and once I got all the way up there, I ran the full marathon I said I would. After being immersed in the wild harshness of the Himalayas and then the hot, colourful bustle of Kathmandu for the best part of a month, returning to drizzly Edinburgh at the start of December 2017 with all its hot chocolate and tinsel was a little surreal. Tea and several variations of garlic soup – sometimes with a side of tough-as-old-boots yak meat – is all well and good, but I'm

not too proud to say I tucked into a very large KFC followed by a bag of wine gums the night I returned home.

May 2018

Blog update

Where to begin? I guess this is a new beginning born out of an ending. Exactly six months ago I crossed the finish line of the Everest Marathon for the military charity, HorseBack UK. The two years of training for it, and then falling ill the night before, created a story that spread over social media and helped to bring the charity and its work helping former soldiers with PTSD that little bit further into the spotlight. That was the point. The money raised was fantastic but people's minds are even more powerful and, if you can get an idea or a concept like that of HorseBack UK into a person's mind, the potential for what they can do for the cause is massive. More people fundraising, more people volunteering, the name being on lips that talk and spread the idea to those who really need the help of the charity but who had never heard of it before.

That was the aftermath – a good aftermath, and one that certainly made the

hours of feeling like death on the 26th and 27th of November last year worth it. Not only did the story capture the attention of those on social media, it's also been a spark for the imaginations of children in the local schools in my area. For the last few months, pictures of yaks, Sherpas and mountains have been delighting kids while I witter on about rocky terrain, freezing temperatures, yak dung and why everyone should pick something utterly ridiculous to aim for at least once in life (probably much to the chagrin of many parents). Seeing the children and teenagers begin to be inspired to take part and push themselves in sport has been fantastic. To give them even a tiny bit of motivation to keep going and imagine even bigger dreams and goals has been completely worth the sweaty hands and flushed complexion at having to stand up in front of so many people and speak like I knew what I was talking about!

Despite talking about it for all those months after returning, the fact it was over didn't really sink in. The whole idea had come about from feeling all out of place after training for my first marathon. I had felt like I couldn't just stop training and fundraising altogether at that point. After Everest though, I

can't say I felt like that. Relieved, yes. Exhausted and glad to no longer be sticking to a preposterous training plan, absolutely. I ate a lot and slept a lot over Christmas, and by the time January came around I was only pottering around aimlessly in the gym because it felt a bit like my second home and I missed it.

Even though I didn't feel a huge urge to get back to running, I did feel like something was out of place. It took me a little while to figure it out but eventually I came to the conclusion it's simply that having a seemingly impossible challenge constantly teasing the edge of my mind day in, day out gave me *something*. Whether it was inspiration, motivation, self-discipline, self-respect or a good solid purpose, it kept me constantly pushing myself and refusing to stay stuck. Some days the idea of my next overly ambitious race to get myself ready for Everest had been enough to scare me into my trainers and out on to the trail, making me train harder than ever. Other days I felt on top of the world knowing I was hitting all the targets I had set myself and was on course to get through the next 'big one'. Maybe it was just the simple dopamine hit, but I was certainly missing elements of the lifestyle I had created over the last two years.

I was considering this void when I came across another military charity that sounded like it ticked all the right boxes: Rock2Recovery. Like HorseBack UK, Rock2Recovery provide practical, hands-on

help to struggling retired military personnel as well as serving personnel, their families and those working for the emergency services. If one of these people, who have put their whole life on the line every day for the good of the nation, is struggling with their mental health, Rock2Recovery is there to catch them. They aim to ensure not one person falls through the gaps. More funding would mean more coaching sessions could be given to those who need it – in other words, the money I raised would go straight to helping actual people in crisis, not CEOs and boards and marketing campaigns. That was the sort of cause I could get behind.

With Everest nicely rounded off and a new worthy cause discovered, I decided it was time to say hello to a new challenge. It didn't take long to find one. In fact, it was a race that had nestled itself into a corner of my brain ever since a fellow Everest runner mentioned it. The Beyond the Ultimate Jungle Ultra. It was a 230km, entirely self-sufficient five-day stage race, hosted by Beyond the Ultimate as part of their global race series. The gruelling multi-stage race sees athletes run from the high-altitude cloud forest of the Peruvian Andes to the Amazon basin, and traverses not only the cloud forest, but mountainsides, rivers, swamps, Amazonian towns and villages, and every jungle scene imaginable in between. Each athlete carries their own equipment, food and hammocks for the duration of the race, with only water provided for them. During the final

day there are over 50 rivers and swamps to cross. The temperatures are swelteringly high with humidity of up to 100 per cent, and there's the ever-present risk of electrical storms to top it off. Alongside this, athletes would have to deal with every animal and insect they could imagine (and some they probably couldn't), especially as a part of the race is run during the night. It was mind-boggling, and there wasn't a single detail that didn't make my heart tingle with excitement.

June 2018

Blog update

It's a scary thing to take the crazy ideas you've been spinning around in your head and announce them publicly as a definite thing. I think this is because, yet again, I'm wondering if this slightly insane idea is actually possible for me. Of course, other runners have managed the BTU Jungle Ultra in previous years, but if we consider for a moment that I've never run more than two long runs back to back, I've never covered more than 90km during a race (never mind 230km), never dealt with humidity, and I certainly haven't delved into a swamp to get to the other side before, much less one likely to be teeming with god knows what ...

A NEW OBSESSION

Oh hell, I've just Googled creatures
that live in the rivers in the Amazon jungle.

* * *

But that aside, I can't get this race out of my head,
so with all the confidence of a mouse on the edge of
a diving board, I'm announcing that I'll be aiming
for the Jungle Ultra start line in June 2020. Time to
get training!