

# Run For Your Life

HOW ONE WOMAN  
RAN CIRCLES AROUND  
BREAST CANCER



**JENNY BAKER**

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# 1

## The Best-Laid Plans...

**I** FIND the last long run before a marathon comes with a huge sense of relief. It is the sign that the bulk of your training is over; you can do no more to influence your performance on the day except sleep, eat well and try not to trip up kerbs. I know lots of runners struggle with the taper at the end of a training plan, the couple of weeks when you reduce the mileage so you can start the race on rested legs, but actually I like that shift in gear, from investing in training to needing to trust it.

Inevitably you wonder if you have done enough and whether you will be able to deliver on race day, but over the next couple of weeks there is a growing sense of anticipation at being about to find out what you are capable of.

This particular last long run had added significance for me because this was the first time I was going to do two marathons in close succession – the Palestine Marathon in Bethlehem at the end of March followed by London a month later. I learned from my 40th that significant birthdays pass better when they are significantly celebrated, so as well as parties with friends and family I had decided to mark turning 50 in 2015 by doing what I loved most: running.

Secretly I wanted to do five marathons that year – Palestine, London, Bath in the autumn with my sister, my first 50km ultra

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along the Suffolk coast and another one somewhere in between just because I could – although I had not yet admitted to all of those out loud. The previous year had been my best year of running; I had got a PB in every distance I had run and had done my highest annual mileage ever. I felt happier in my skin approaching my 50th birthday than at any other time in my life, and running was a huge contributing factor, giving me a sense of physical, spiritual and mental well-being. Life was good.

My plan on that cold day in March was to do a 20-mile loop, running along roads through Kew to Richmond, following the trail inside the perimeter of Richmond Park and then home along the river with a lap of Ealing Common at the end to make up the distance. Urban runners need to be more intentional about finding green spaces and trails to run in, and this route had a good mix of scenery and surfaces. It also had a reasonable number of inclines, which are few and far between in Ealing where I live. Palestine is a hilly marathon, run over a two-lap course because there are not 26.2 consecutive miles on the roads leading out of Bethlehem without checkpoints on the way. It is a tough course because although more people take part each year, not many do the full marathon and you end up running most of it on your own which is why I was doing this training run solo.

Having made it up the long slow rise of Richmond Hill and past the old Royal Star and Garter Home for injured servicemen that was now being turned into luxury flats, it was a relief to turn in to the park and follow the trail round the edge. Richmond Park is the closest we west-Londoners can get to proper countryside, created 400 years earlier as a hunting park for royalty. It has areas of wide-open scrublands filled with ancient trees where deer still roam as well as ponds, rugby pitches and woodland gardens. It is a busy place, a magnet for cyclists and runners and a scenic cut-through for cars on their way to south London. But it is one of my favourite places to run, a place to breathe deeply and savour the trails, a place to forget the urban sprawl that lies on the other side of the wall and try to spot the deer under the trees. I settled into a steady pace after the exertion of the hill, running on autopilot.

## THE BEST-LAID PLANS...

And then, all at once:

a tug as my foot catches on something;  
confusion as the ground rushes to meet me;  
a futile attempt to break my fall with my hands;  
an involuntary grunt as the breath is knocked from me;  
a thud as my knee hits the ground and a smack as my  
cheekbone lands on tarmac.

Split-second silence.

Stillness.

Shakily, I get up and hobble back to the path. It takes me a little while to work out what has happened and what to do next. I had tripped on something and landed on the road across the entrance to the car park. My leggings had ripped and my knee was bleeding. I could feel that my lip was already starting to swell. I made my way over to the café and asked to use their toilets.

Disinterested, the guy behind the counter waved me over to the portakabins at the far side of the car park. There were other people around, runners, cyclists and dog walkers but no one stopped to ask me how I was or find out whether they could help. I assessed the damage in the mirror, dabbing at my face with some damp loo paper and cursing my lack of attention that had led to my fall. What should I do? I could ring Jonny, my husband, to get him to come and pick me up, or keep going and do the route that I had planned.

I decided on a middle option, to run back home from there; it wouldn't be quite the 20 miles in my schedule but it would be closer than the nine that I had just done. My knee felt stiff as I set off but after a while it loosened up a bit and I plodded for home.

Five miles later I had to admit defeat. My knee was really painful. I had almost reached Kew Bridge, which is a couple of miles from my home. I got my phone out and pressed Jonny's name to call him, only for the wheel of death to appear on the screen and for the battery to die. I allowed myself some tears of self-pity as I realised my only option was to walk.

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It takes a moment to trip; it takes longer to realise the full implications. Two hours later, I was eating breakfast in the kitchen after a shower, feeling more positive now I was warm again and determined that this was not going to derail my plans. Three days later I was tired of having to explain where my marvellous black eye had come from and was trying to be patient about getting back to running. A week later, I tried a tentative couple of miles round the common only to realise that this was more serious than I thought.

After several trips to the physio, I had to admit I wasn't going to run a marathon in Palestine and I withdrew from London as well, devastated that everything was going wrong. Of course I *knew* that there would be other races, that I would recover from my injuries, that it wasn't the end of the world, but what I *felt* was a visceral sense of loss, a death of a dream and a fear that this could be the end of my running.

In March, I went to Palestine but just ran the 10k because my knee couldn't take any more. And in April I watched my son and my friends do the London Marathon, loving the occasion and enjoying their achievements. In between the two, I had found out that a couple of missed races was trivial compared to the challenge that lay ahead. That fall in the park was just the start of this year not turning out as I planned.

## Becoming a Runner

**I** CAN tell you when I became a mother, when I became a teacher, when I became a mother-in-law. The memories of where these shifts in identity took place are strong – giving birth, my first job, my son’s wedding. It is harder to pinpoint when I became a runner, that moment when running changed from being something that I occasionally did in my spare time, to being a core strand of my identity.

But I can remember my first race. Jonny and I moved to London when we were both 30, with our two young sons Joel and Harry, who were five and three respectively. We had lived in Bath before that and discovered when we turned up in Ealing that lots of parents we met aspired to do the opposite, to move out of the urban sprawl to somewhere ‘safe’ and ‘beautiful’ for their children to grow up.

Like many women my age I was juggling work and parenting, and struggling to make friends in this rather bewildering city. I joined the local YMCA gym and one of the trainers there encouraged me to do a 5k race they were putting on in the local park.

My memory is hazy about how much training I did, but I remember going out to run round the park in preparation. On the day, there was a group of proper runners who filled the space near

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the start line with their club running shirts and their confident talk about other races they had done.

I hung back, feeling like a fraud, but when the race began I found myself drawn into their orbit, trying to keep up. Having set off far too fast, it wasn't long before I had to walk to try and get my breathing back under control. The rest of the race went the same way, spurts of trying to run properly interwoven with bouts of embarrassed walking. It was not a huge success. I have no record of my time, of whether there was a medal, or of where I finished in the standings but I can still conjure up that feeling of not fitting in, of not being a 'proper' runner.

A couple of years later, I was working for a charity when one of my colleagues, Lorna, got a corporate entry into the second year of the London Triathlon. She and her husband were keen to do it as a personal challenge but also to raise money for the charity. What she perhaps had not thought through was the fact that most other people working there were far from sporty and her increasingly desperate requests for people who would use the other three entries eventually wore me down. I said I would have a go. Jonny's response, not surprisingly given my underwhelming 5k performance, was to laugh at me but that only made me more determined.

We signed up for the Olympic distance, a 1,500m swim in open water, a 40k cycle and a 10k run. I had never done those distances in any of the three disciplines before. I went to the pool more often in preparation and cycled when I could, as well as running a couple of times a week. Not a very effective training plan, I now realise, but that was all I knew. I bought an occasional copy of a triathlon magazine, but found its advice complex and intimidating.

The day before the race, I took my bike over to the Excel Centre in the London Docklands, and left it on a crowded rack in a vast hall, its bulky lime-green frame and mountain bike tyres standing out like a sore thumb among the sleek and skinny machines that everyone else seemed to have. Race day was grey and cold, and as my wave made our way down to the water's edge,

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we passed an ambulance with a group of people crowded round someone who had just been fished out of the water. My stomach was a churning mass of nerves, but it was only when the swim started that the enormity of what I was attempting truly hit me and I realised how poor my preparation had been.

It seems incredible to me now, but my first ever experience of open-water swimming was during this open-water race. I had done several sessions in my hired wetsuit at the local pool during my training but just hadn't appreciated how different it is to swim in a lake, or river or dock compared to swimming in a leisure centre. There is no blue row of tiles on the floor making sure you swim in a straight line. There is no floor, at least not one that you can see, just a murky greenness when you put your head in the water.

The start was a mass of thrashing arms and legs as the swim got underway but it was not long before I was left in a scary calm as everyone else surged ahead. I felt completely overwhelmed and came very close to abandoning the race at the start, but the thought of having to admit to the 60 or so people who had sponsored me to do this that I had given up kept me going. I did the whole 1,500m in breaststroke with my head out of the water, painfully slowly. Towards the end, I waved to my family who were patiently standing on the edge of a dock, and a safety marshal in a kayak zoomed over to check I was okay. I had inadvertently used the distress signal when all I wanted to communicate was that I was still alive and persevering. As tempting as it was to seek refuge on his boat, I kept going.

Finally, finally I made it to the end where another couple of marshals helped me out of the water and on to my feet. My legs gave way as I tried to stand and one of them helpfully said, 'You can do a sprint distance, you know.'

The rest of the race was a blur. According to the results that I faithfully recorded in a spreadsheet, I spent nearly two hours on my mountain bike, most of it being overtaken by people who started in the wave behind me. Proper triathletes practise their transitions to minimise the time spent going from one discipline

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to the next. I went to the loo after I got off my bike, to try and delay the moment when I had to start running.

The three laps of the run each seemed far longer than the one before and all contained a fair amount of walking, but I finally turned the corner into the finishing stretch to see Lorna and my poor long-suffering family still standing there to cheer me on. 'Look at the time, Jenny,' Lorna shouted to me but I had no idea what she meant.

I stumbled to the finishing line, overwhelmed with relief that now I could finally stop running. My time was 4 hours and 24 seconds; Lorna had been trying to encourage me to come in under four hours but I had no reserves of energy to draw from to turn my stagger into a run. Still, I had done my first triathlon.

And I had got the bug. In the weeks that followed, I realised how much I had loved setting myself this challenge and rising to it. I loved being fit and I loved the regular discipline of exercise so I continued to do Olympic-distance triathlons over the next ten years, slowly improving on my time and technique. I invested many hours and lots of money into learning to swim front crawl over a period of four years, working my way through a friend who offered to coach me, a class at my local swimming pool, and an intensive weekend course whose hosts assured me it was suitable for beginners. It was not.

In the end, I paid a private swimming coach an extortionate amount of money to work with me one-to-one and it was worth it. The first time I swam 60 lengths of a pool non-stop, the magical 1,500m I would need to do in a triathlon, I burst into tears at the end much to the consternation of the guy next to me who gave me a worried look and quickly dived under water.

It is often said that running is the cheapest and easiest form of exercise, and at one level that is true. You just put on your trainers and get out the front door. Inevitably though, the longer you do it the more professionals and the more products get drawn into becoming an essential part of your experience.

I went to see a physio while I was training for triathlons because I couldn't run far without my knee hurting. I now know

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that was my ITB band protesting and what was needed was regular time with a foam roller. He talked me into an expensive habit of treatments with ultrasound and didn't once show me the stretches that would have solved the problem. Fortunately charlatans like him are few and far between, and if I had had some running companions they would have alerted me sooner that I was wasting my cash.

I also had regular problems with my lower back giving way. I sought out a chiropractor after I pulled a muscle in my back just reaching for the shampoo in the shower, and she diagnosed a wonky pelvis that she gradually got back into alignment for me. My running experience was transformed. My knee stopped hurting, I could run further and more freely and could expect my body to deliver more when I asked it to.

A friend, Kevin Draper, had a go at triathlons after he saw my first London experience and had an even stronger conversion than me. His investment in training saw him competing impressively at age-group standard and he qualified as a coach. He offered to coach me for what would be my final triathlon in 2008, although I didn't realise it at the time, and I finished in less than three hours, an improvement on my original time that I was really pleased with.

But training for three sports takes hours each week; I would swim twice, run twice and try to fit in a long cycle. When I started a Masters degree in gender studies in my spare time the following autumn, I realised how precious that spare time was. I had to admit to my competitive self that if I did another triathlon I would want to better my time, but what with work, parenting and study I just didn't currently have the spare hours I needed to invest in training.

But I also knew that I needed to keep doing some kind of exercise. I had been introduced to the Ignatian examen, a regular practice of reflecting on the events of the day and identifying the moments that give life and those that drain energy. It was developed by St Ignatius, the Spanish founder of the Jesuits, while he was recovering from terrible injuries suffered in a battle

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against the French. Through long static days in bed, he recognised that some of his thoughts and daydreams left him downhearted and deadened, while others left him energised and excited about the future. He crafted this insight into the examen, a practice of looking back on your day and asking ‘for what moment am I most grateful?’, and then ‘for what moment am I least grateful?’ Over time the answers to these questions help you discern where God might be active in your life and what you might be called to.

The idea is that you can learn from both consolation and desolation, that each is an invitation to growth. You can choose to make space in your life for more of the things that cause gratitude and pay attention to what drains life from you.

Over a period of time I recognised that running and exercise were the things I was most grateful for. I felt guilty at first, feeling that I ought to have identified something more spiritual, that surely running could not count. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised how much running meant to me and how much it contributed to my well-being, physically, mentally and spiritually, so running became an essential part of my life and in 2009 I set myself a different kind of challenge, a half-marathon.

Every race starts with some kind of question. Can I run this far? Can I run that fast? Have I done enough training? What difference does this cold make? Is my knee fixed? Am I faster than her yet? And you only find the answer by running the race. I signed up for the Folkestone Half-Marathon wondering if I could run that far and discovered that I could. Each race not only answers a question, it also sets another target, a time to beat or a training plan to improve or a different course to conquer. I finished Folkestone in just under two hours and wondered how much faster I could go.

And I also wondered how much further I could run. When I did triathlons, people would often ask me if I was going to run a marathon and I always said no because of the problems I had with my knee. A 10k had seemed to be my running limit. But now my chiropractor had straightened me out, now I had done a half-marathon, maybe a marathon was not impossible.

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One day I spent time with Letty Wilson, a friend who I had known from university. We had done a maths and computing degree together, had briefly become maths teachers and had been each other's best women when we got married. Although we now lived 30 miles apart, we still made the effort to see each other regularly. By now we were both in our mid-40s and she started talking about the things she hoped to achieve by the time she was 50. I had not particularly thought about getting that old yet, but I was struck by one of the things on her list – running a marathon. I borrowed the idea from her and looked around for one to sign up to.

What exactly is it that spurs us on to go further or to be faster? For me it was the new horizon that was opened up by each achievement. I had been painfully shy as a teenager and although I had overcome much of that as I had grown up, I had always had a loud internal voice criticising what I was doing and keeping me in check. Achieving the challenges of doing a triathlon, conquering front crawl, running my first half-marathon all helped me see myself in a new light even though I was hesitant to own the labels in public, as a triathlete, a swimmer, and a runner. If I could do these things that I had once thought impossible, what else was within my reach? What else could I achieve if I only tried?

I was still very much a solo runner trying to work it out for myself. Knowing nothing about marathons, I looked online for one to enter. It was towards the end of the year and most of the marathons I found via the Runner's World website were already full so I entered the first one near me that still had spaces, the inaugural Sussex Marathon in April 2011, and signed up for their training plan. When you know very little about something, you put yourself in the hands of those who seem to have the expertise you are lacking.

The training plan was three runs a week, gradually extending the long run towards 20 miles. I still felt on the outside of this world of running, and lacked the confidence to interrogate it and make it my own. So I just faithfully followed the plan, building up the mileage and logging it on a spreadsheet when I got home. I

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remember the first time I ran 16 miles and arrived back exhausted, wondering how on earth I would ever manage another ten miles on top of that. But the plan for the next week said 18 miles, so that is what I did and gradually built up to 22 miles which made me feel perhaps I could run a marathon after all.

The race organisers had to alter the route they had advertised because they didn't get permission to close the roads. Instead of the meandering course through country roads that they had aspired to, the route ended up being a six-mile loop starting in Battle, and then an out-and-back hilly run to Ashburnham that you had to do twice. The race fell on Mothers' Day, so Jonny and I invited his mum, Alison, who lived nearby in Sussex, to come and watch the race with him while I ran – how generous of us!

I felt incredibly nervous before the start, and got very, very cold. I started the race wearing a jacket with my race number pinned on the front and with pockets full of energy gels to keep me going through several hours of running. My target time was 4 hours 20 minutes and I set off at a steady pace, determined not to repeat my 5k mistake by starting too fast too soon.

Of course as I got going, I warmed up and then overheated. Mile five was spent unpinning my race number from my jacket and replacing it on my top underneath while still running, then fishing out the gels from the pockets and squirrelling them away on my body – a couple tucked under my bra straps, two more stuffed down the front of my leggings. When I passed Jonny and his mum in Battle at the end of the first loop, I thrust my jacket into their outstretched arms and continued down the road, trying to stop a gel from migrating down the inside of my leggings to my feet, while still running. I think I ended up trapping it in my knickers.

In my memory, the trek to Ashburnham is like a sine wave, one vicious hill after another with the downhill in between giving a meagre feeling of respite. I managed to run the first 18 miles of the race, but the next hill defeated me and I had to walk. And once I had walked once it was impossible not to do it again. The last eight miles of my race turned into a laboured walk up one hill and an unsteady jog down to the next. My target time

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came and went and disappeared into the ether. I finished the race in 5 hours and 3 minutes, aware in the last few miles that I would be close to the magical five-hour target but, like my triathlon experience, unable to summon any extra energy to hit it.

I collected my medal just after crossing the line and went to meet my very bored husband and his mum. I felt wobbly and emotional, and strangely disappointed that it had been so hard and had taken me so long. I didn't have much of a sense of achievement. I thought I had done enough training in preparation, but I had underestimated just how much a marathon takes out of you physically, mentally and emotionally. If I were ever to do another one, I would need a different approach.

That summer a message arrived via Facebook from Godfrey Rust, a friend whose son had been in the same class as Harry at school. 'Hi Jenny – just remembered you're a regular runner. A couple of months ago I joined Ealing Eagles, who do park runs in our territory on Monday and Wednesday evenings – good fun sociable crowd, all standards and ages, equal split male/female. Thought I'd mention it in case it would fit your schedule to run with a bunch of others anytime. It's helping me in my struggle to get back to some kind of fitness!'

So began a whole new chapter of my running life and I joined the Ealing Eagles Running Club in July 2011. It took me a while to get into it. The first few runs I turned up for, I felt awkward and didn't really talk to anyone. But the more runs I went to, the more I began to feel I belonged. The active Facebook group for the club made it easier to get to know people and remember names. I made friends and started to work out who was a similar runner to me. And best of all, I got to know Kelvin Walker, who was training to be a running coach and needed someone to practise on.

Kelvin is an accountant by training and someone who throws himself fully into whatever is in front of him. As well as doing his coaching training, he was the Eagles' treasurer, he led the beginners' sessions for the club, and he was hatching a plan with some others to set up a half-marathon in Ealing the following autumn. Kelvin is a wonderfully positive person, a natural

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encourager, and he does a mean Bruce Springsteen impression after a few pints of beer.

I had decided that I wanted to try another marathon so had signed up for Brighton in April 2012, and Kelvin kindly agreed to coach me for it. He designed a training plan for me and we met weekly to talk about how things were going. I had done a few more half-marathons by then, and based on those times, I decided to aim for a sub-four-hour marathon at Brighton. Kelvin encouraged me to have more than one goal for the race, so that whatever time I did it in there would be something to celebrate. My first goal was to run all the way as I had walked some of the previous marathon; the next to beat my time from the year before; then to shave an hour off my PB; and then the top goal, to finish in under four hours.

The encouragement and wisdom of a coach and the friendship and healthy competition of other runners made all the difference to my training experience. One Sunday that winter I woke up to snow on the ground. I had been planning to do the club ten-mile run that morning and checked the website to find that it was officially cancelled for safety reasons, but I was sure that wouldn't put everyone off.

I went downstairs in my running kit, to the ridicule of my family who thought snow was the best excuse to spend the morning in bed. I made my way up to the club run meeting point on Ealing Green to find another dozen runners there, and we set off in high spirits for our unofficial run, not worried about speed, but just enjoying the beauty and playfulness of running in snow. My heart was full as I ran; these were people for whom running marathons was normal, who were not put off by a bit of snow, who got why running was worth pursuing. This was my tribe.

Training with Kelvin's input felt much more purposeful and enlightened. My training had more variety and I understood why each of the different sessions in the week was important. I relished the challenge of the 16-week plan I was following, and really appreciated having such an encouraging and positive coach. But the disappointment of the year before nagged at me. I found

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myself thinking after each session, 'Well I've managed that one, but I don't know if I'll be able to do the next.'

And then one day it clicked. Marathon training is an act of faith. The running that I had already done had set me up for the running that I was going to do in the future; I will be able to run tomorrow because I ran yesterday. I started approaching my next sessions, not with the dread that I would fail, but with a curiosity to discover what my body could now do. You run with your whole being, not just your legs, and that means your mind and your spirit too.

Over the years I have found the most difficult aspect of running is training my mind, developing that mental endurance that enables me to keep going when everything in me says stop. I realised that that is where I needed to trust the training I have done, the wisdom and experience behind the training plans I have followed, the encouragement and support of friends who have run more marathons than me, the belief of a coach who could see the potential that I doubted, the memories of the winter runs in the dark and the snow which had set me up for my Brighton race.

I ended up going down to Brighton on my own. Jonny had little interest in running and had no wish to repeat the tedium of the previous year's spectating experience, and I didn't know anyone else in the club who was doing the race. Kelvin had the final session of his coaching course that day so couldn't be there to cheer me on.

I stayed with friends in Brighton the night before, who fed me pasta and gave me a lift to the start. This time my nerves were more manageable, a gentle reminder that this was a serious undertaking but one that was within my grasp. It was a much larger race than Sussex with thousands of entrants rather than hundreds, and the start of the race was really crowded. I struggled to get into my groove as I weaved through other runners and did my second and third miles far too fast. But then my race head kicked in, the other runners thinned out and I settled into a steady pace.

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The Brighton Marathon starts inland at Preston Park but most of it is run along the coast. It was a bright, sunny day and the sparkling sea was a fantastic backdrop to the determined efforts of the runners. I find races inspiring, to think of all the time and effort that has gone into training, the goals and dreams that runners are pursuing, the different things that have motivated people to enter this race. It is very moving seeing people running in charity shirts or with people's faces or names on their backs, a story of loss or challenge behind each runner.

I was running with my dad in mind. He had been growing increasingly frail over the previous couple of years and was now confined to bed. He had been a talented runner when he was young, and had won cross-country, 800m and 1,500m British Army championships when he had done his National Service. I had been to see him a couple of weeks before the marathon and had talked to him about the race. He said 'run it for me' so I had ironed the words 'For my Dad' on to the back of my shirt.

The attraction of the sea view began to pale towards the end of the race. From mile 19 the course heads out towards the power station by Shoreham Harbour, an industrial area with few spectators, and I found the next few miles a hard slog. I was wearing a pace band with the mile splits for a four-hour race, and had been watching my Garmin GPS watch closely, which told me how far and how fast I was going. The mental calculations of what pace I needed to do to hit my target were a welcome distraction from the pain in my legs. I could see that if I kept going at my current pace I was likely to finish in just over four hours, but even though I tried to speed up and I felt like I was putting more effort in, my watch showed me the unwelcome truth that I was actually getting slower.

Sure enough, I finished in 4 hours and 2 minutes. Those first post-race minutes, when you have finally stopped running, bring an intense exhaustion. Initially I felt some disappointment not to have gone under four hours, but then I realised I had hit three out of my four targets. It is not bad to do your second marathon over an hour faster than your first, and it showed how much better my

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training had been thanks to the coaching I had had from Kelvin. I texted him and my dad with my time, and made my weary way home, delighted with what I had achieved.

Later that year I did my Leader in Running Fitness qualification with Mark Yabsley, a basic one-day coaching course that qualifies you to lead a running group. Mark gave me a lift to where the course was being held in Teddington, and we swapped stories about our running experiences on the way over. Mark had had an episode of ME many years before which had prompted him to rethink his career and retrain, and he now ran his own gardening business.

Mark and I joined Kelvin's beginners' course as volunteers and soon took over leading it. It was a six-week course that got people doing the local parkrun, a free, timed 5k race that happened in nearby Gunnersbury Park. The first session started with running for two minutes, then walking for two, repeated several times. Some people struggled to do that at first and for them, the goal of being able to run continuously for 5k seemed out of reach. I loved watching people progress from week to week, seeing their confidence grow and their fitness improve. It was a joy to do the parkrun with them at the end of the six weeks, to see them achieve the goal that had felt unattainable just a few weeks before.

I found it interesting that almost all of the people who came to our beginners' group were female, while there was a much more even split of men and women in the actual club. That kind of imbalance always makes me ask why it is happening. It seemed that most men got themselves into running and didn't feel the need of a structured course to help them.

We encouraged people to talk during the beginners' group; it is a good way of ensuring you set out at the right kind of pace because if you can't hold a conversation while you are running then you are definitely going too fast. Chatting to women as we ran about why they had joined, it was clear that there were a variety of reasons, because, after all, women are very diverse; we are not carbon copies of each other. Some didn't have the

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confidence to just turn up to a club run. Some hadn't done any exercise since school and needed the accountability and motivation of a structured plan. Some wanted to get to know other runners and figured, rightly, that the beginners' group was a good way of connecting with people. And some women were afraid to run on their own, feeling that the streets were too risky, particularly in the dark, and they wanted the safety of numbers.

I could identify with that last reason because I had often wrestled with the same issue as I decided where and when I would run over the years. The reality is that women grow up with the threat of attack and rape by strangers, and that fear restricts our movement. It stops us going out late or on our own, makes us hyper-alert when we are in a secluded area, and puts some places completely out of bounds to us.

But it is important to get the risk in perspective. Crime figures show that it is men who are more likely to be on the receiving end of a violent attack by a stranger and most rapes are perpetrated by someone known to those attacked. Every woman will have to make her own choice about what she is comfortable with. As I thought about where it was safe to run, I did not want to be naïve or unwise, but nor did I want to collude with that climate of fear and let it dictate how I moved around when actually the risk is pretty small.

In fact, in over 15 years of running I had only had two encounters that had made me feel uncomfortable and made me question the safety of running. One Sunday morning I went out quite early and was running along the river from Richmond to Kew on my way home. Ahead of me, I could see a man in the distance, crouching by the path and pointing his hand towards me as if it was a gun. As I got nearer, he slunk across the path in front of me to crouch on the opposite side, keeping his finger trained on me as I ran past.

My initial reaction was one of fear – what was he doing? Was he going to come after me? I couldn't see anyone else in front of me and when I looked back he had disappeared, but that meant I didn't know where he was.

## BECOMING A RUNNER

I was relieved to see some other runners and a cyclist approaching and kept glancing back to check I was not being followed. It unsettled me but once I was safely back home I got really angry. This man had encroached on my run, on what I thought of as my space, and had made me feel unsafe doing something that I loved.

The other encounter happened at the end of a run after I had bought a newspaper and breakfast pastries at the local shop. As I walked back across the common, a guy who was completely high on something walked alongside me, chatting and telling me how fit my legs were. There were people around in the distance but I was going back to an empty house and I obviously did not want him to know where I lived.

As we got closer to the end of my road I had to tell him very strongly to stop following me. He eventually complied and he was so off his head I suspect he wouldn't have any memory of it later, but I did feel wary the next few times I went out running 'just in case' he was around.

Both of those incidents stayed with me for a while and had an impact on where I felt safe, but two unsettling encounters in thousands of runs in 15 years, neither of which harmed me at all, is a fairly insignificant threat. I was glad that our beginners' group was a way for women to address that fear, and I hoped that it would help them get the risk in perspective so that their freedom was not curtailed unnecessarily.

So where in that litany of running experiences did I become a runner? Actually, I think anyone who runs can call themselves a runner. You don't need to run far or run fast, to have done a certain number of races or conquered a particular distance. I was a runner after that first 5k. I need not have felt intimidated by the running club shirts and I am sure the people wearing them wouldn't have wanted me to. I had as much right to be there as anyone else. But I think I most *felt* like a runner after I had joined the Eagles, when I became part of a community of runners who shared my love of running and spurred each other on to new challenges.

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Running was by now a regular habit. It was my headspace and a huge source of well-being, mentally, physically and emotionally. Running had given me a new community to belong to, and a new skill to use in the coaching I was doing for beginners. But running could be a whole lot more. The year after I did Brighton, I discovered running as an expression of a basic human right, running as a form of protest and running as an act of solidarity with people whose freedom was limited but whose spirits remained strong. I went running in Palestine.