

CHAPTER FIVE MAY 2ND 1998

A Running Start



Dee! Wake up. ABC Radio is on the phone.” I stumbled out of bed and squinted at my watch. It was 6am. The big day was here at last.

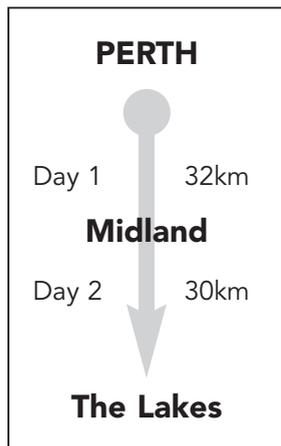
The interviewer bombarded me with the questions everyone asked me: Why? Where? How long? What for? And one unexpected one: “Don’t you think you might get out there in the middle of the Nullarbor and after a month think, ‘What the heck am I doing out here?’”

I replied confidently. “Yes. But I want to be positive about the whole thing. No point in starting if I don’t!”
“Well good luck, and good on ya, mate.”

I switched off the telephone handset and pulled back the curtains, letting the early morning sunshine stream into the small spare room. I was in Kingsley, a friendly suburb just north of Perth, in a large bungalow built from the ground up by Peter and Marina, a couple I’d met 10 years before while travelling in Europe. It was pure Australian suburbia, with an in-ground pool in the front yard, and a back garden complete with patio, built-in barbecue, a dog house for Tessie, their Jack Russell terrier, a vegetable and herb garden, and a swing set and playhouse for their daughters Emma and Ashleigh.

I still had loads to do before heading at 10am to North Beach, my starting point, where I was meeting Sonja Pritchard of the Western Australian RSPCA, and the television news media. The hours flew by. It was 9:45am before I knew it, and I wasn’t even out of the door.

Sonja called on my mobile phone, saying she was already at the beach, waiting for me to arrive. The police were there as well. The day before, Peter and I had driven my first day’s route and noticed a ‘Pedestrians Prohibited’ sign at the turn onto the Reid Highway, although there were pedestrian crossing lights at the intersections less than 500 metres beyond, with sidewalks and curb depressions at crossing points. It was purely a last-minute thought to let the police know that a Canadian woman would be running along their highway pushing a pram. Peter had made the call, speaking to Perth’s traffic and special events officer, who had moaned about the short notice, but managed to arrange a police escort.



We arrived at North Beach at exactly 10am, the precise time I'd told the television crews from Channels Two, Seven, Nine and Ten to arrive. But they weren't there. We stood around making small talk for the next five minutes. Still no media. The previous night they had all told me they'd be here. I got out my mobile phone from the Baby Jogger and called them.

"There's a school rally on."

"Sorry, but there's a car event happening."

"We have to prioritise the news."

My police escort was under the command of Sergeant Parkes, the traffic and special events officer, whose 'uniform' consisted of skin-tight Levi's, tight grey t-shirt over bulging biceps, crew-cut hair with distinguishing grey side-burns, and mirror sunglasses that I imagined were permanently fixed to his face. And he was sporting an ego the size of Western Australia.

"It was a lot of work to organise the police escorts at such short notice."

I did feel a little bad for not thinking of contacting them earlier.

"Thank you," I said. "I totally appreciate the effort you've made."

"I'm also concerned for your safety. How far have you run before?"

"I've done 100km and 66km ultra-distance runs, three marathons and over a dozen half marathons."

He nodded. "Do you have extra bearings for your wheels?"

"No."

"How much cash are you carrying with you?"

"About 200 dollars."

"Hmmm. Well, let the towns know ahead of time, so they can arrange for escorts."

"Okay. Thank you very much."

He seemed about to leave, then turned back. "I also think you're fucking stupid. And that's my professional opinion."

I stared at him in disbelief.

"I've backpacked around the world three times," he continued, "and what you're planning to do is fucking stupid."

I just looked at him, expressionless. I thought of half a dozen angry answers to his comments, but I said nothing. I wasn't even sure of his point – he couldn't do this, so I shouldn't try? He'd backpacked around the world three times, so he was obviously superior to everyone else? (I'd backpacked for the past ten years!) Or, I was a woman so I shouldn't attempt anything like this – in his 'professional opinion'? What exactly *was* his professional opinion?

"I *hope* you make it," he said, as he turned around and started to walk away. Then he turned back and mumbled, "Uh, well I mean... good luck."

A low-lying wall separated the road at North Beach from the stretch of white sand. A narrow sloping path led about 20 metres down to the beach, with

wooden handrails, and low-lying green shrubs on either side. The edge of the sea spilled across the pale, soft sand another 50 metres beyond the pathway. As I walked down the sloping path to the edge of the sea, the reality of it all finally began to hit me. The savoury smell of the water, the swish of the waves, the ocean breeze on my face, and the indigo water – it all penetrated my soul.

Peter cranked the video for the official start while Marina took photos. At 10:18am, I dipped my Asics into the Indian Ocean, signalling the official beginning of my Mission Possible, and ran back up the sloping path with Tessie the terrier in tow. Marina and Sonja took more pictures at the top of the ramp of me with the Baby Jogger. Then I handed Tessie back, took off my windbreaker, tucked it under BJ's sun canopy, said my farewells, and set off running down North Beach Road, pushing BJ in front, my police escort following a few metres behind. Finally, I was on my way. This was it, just me and the road – 5000km of it, stretching east to Sydney.

Starting a day earlier than my final departure date of May 3rd allowed me to ease into things with two days of 30km; I'd still be ahead of my 50km-per-day plan. I would follow North Beach Road east, then the Reid Highway south until it intersected the Great Eastern Highway. The plan was to rendezvous with Peter at the end of the day, at the bottom of Greenmount Hill, on the Great Eastern Highway out of Perth. Meanwhile, Sonja would contact the media again to see if they'd come out during the day or get to the next morning's start at 7am.

From there I'd be travelling east until I hit Kalgoorlie, almost 600km away. I planned to stay in youth hostels, motels, and homes of friends en route, camping in areas where accommodation was unavailable.

It was a beautiful sunny day: the sky was turquoise blue with not a cloud in sight. There was a sidewalk along North Beach Road for the first 5km, then a right angle turn to the left. A hundred metres beyond that, I got into the right turning lane and turned with the cars onto the Reid Highway, towards Midland. The police car trundled along impatiently behind me. My mobile phone rang, and since I couldn't co-ordinate running, pushing and talking on the phone at the same time, I stopped on the hard shoulder. It was Mom and Dad calling from Canada to say hi and good luck. It was great to hear their voices. Once my family had become used to the idea that I was committed to this continental crossing, they had been supportive. I told them I'd call back at 7pm Perth time, so we could talk about how the first day had gone. Then I walked back to the cops, thanked them, and told them they didn't have to stay – I knew the way.

Ten kilometres further on, the smooth, sealed surface turned to gravel, making it much harder to manoeuvre BJ. I stopped several times to drink from my water bottle, again not having the co-ordination to look, push, run, and drink at the same time. I hadn't really planned the day in terms of breaks for food, drink, rest, or stretching. My only goal was to reach Greenmount Hill in roughly three hours, running at a continuous 10km per hour.

By midday it was uncomfortably hot for running, the temperature climbing above 30 degrees Celsius, with no wind, and little or no shade on the freeway. I was wearing a long-sleeved black running top. With only a sports bra underneath, modesty prevented me from taking off my shirt; there was tons of traffic on the dual carriageway.

Three hours and 20km later, I started to flag. As the interviewer had predicted, I was already wondering what the hell I was doing out here. My original projections of running 50km a day already looked insanelly optimistic, and it was feeling like the London Marathon all over again. I began to recalculate my daily mileage in my head. *What if I do 40km a day? What if I do 30... or 20? How many days would it take? Slow and steady wins the race... I have to finish in six months because that's when my visa runs out... This is so hard... What the hell am I doing out here?*

I saw a dead bunny. I found a mobile phone. I met two cops on the side of the road, talking. I asked them if they were stopping for me.

"No ma'am. Who are you?"

"I'm the one running to Sydney," I explained.

One of them pulled out some change from his pocket. I opened a pocket in my money belt and he dropped in two dollars and 30 cents in change. As they drove past they honked and flashed their cruiser lights, and wished me luck on the car megaphone.

He had given me a donation without even asking if I was raising money for something, or for whom. I had set a target of raising 50,000 dollars for the RSPCA, and now I had my first donation. It was a start. Only 49,997.70 dollars to go!

Suburban bungalows gave way to green paddocks. Horses raised their heads and stared as I ran past. At intersections, people peered from their cars. The Perth radio stations had announced I'd be on the highway, so I got a few honks, thumbs up and 'good lucks' out of car windows. It renewed my motivation, and I kept my pace at a run, albeit a slow one, only walking the last 5km as I swore the end was in sight. It seemed so much further than when we had driven the route the previous day.

At last I reached the turn-off for the Great Eastern Highway and pulled out the phone to call Peter and Marina. Just then it rang! It was Peter to say they were on their way. I was immensely glad that Peter and Marina had offered to pick me up at the end of the first two days, and drop me back in the mornings. I wouldn't be completely on my own until day three.

At the Golden Village Chinese Food Restaurant parking lot, I lay on the ground with my feet up, resting against BJ. I was in agony and utterly exhausted – and it was only the first day! I looked up at the road I would have to tackle the next day. It began with Greenmount Hill, five-and-a-half kilometres straight up, with little or no shoulder on either side of the road. I wanted to disappear.

I was relieved when they arrived to pick me up, giving me an excuse not to think about the next day. Marina took some more photos and I marked the road with yellow spray paint, so I could start at exactly the same place the next morning. As we drove back over my first day's route, I recorded the exact distance on the car's odometer: 32km. I took stock of how I'd fared. I was sore and had some serious sunburn on my face, the tops of my hands and my legs. I was wiped out.

Peeling my clothes off before getting into the shower was an effort. Lifting my leg up to step over the six-inch shower ledge was even worse. I stood under the cool stream of water for 20 minutes, washing myself down. A shower normally washed away at least some of the pain, but not this time. I followed the shower with a long soak in a tub filled with Radox Aching Muscles bath soak. I felt only marginally better. I dried off and slathered my body with Goanna Oil, one of my few sponsored donations.

I tried to take a nap, but I kept getting phone calls, and had to make some of my own, to the Press and Sonja. Marina was in the dining room, painting the back of my running shirt with 'Mission Possible for the RSPCA', and then doing the same on a square of bright pink material to go in the front of the Baby Jogger, inside the rain canopy. It looked great! Meanwhile I tried to organise all of my stuff, but there was just too much to do and so much to think about.

Later that evening, we went out to dinner to an Italian place, Tortellini's, to celebrate the first day of my run. It was hard to put on a brave face for the duration of the meal. All I could think about was how much pain I was in, the sleep I craved... and the next day's hill! I gave the cashier my credit card, to which Marina objected. But I knew I wouldn't be able to send a gift to thank them. I had disrupted their whole routine for five days of late nights; they had driven me around everywhere, to buy food, bike supplies, a mobile phone and even for some sight-seeing. And the kids had gone a bit wild with a new guest in the house. A meal was the least I could do.

Back at the house I got ready for bed and took another look at my feet: two big blisters on my heels, and more on the bottom of both fourth toes. I popped them to let them drain, hoping they would dry and harden up for the morning.

* * *

I was up at the crack of dawn, and Peter drove me back to the Golden Village Chinese Food Restaurant. He had been up till midnight the previous night sorting out a cyclometer for BJ so I could track my speed, daily distances and total distance. He'd soldered on an extra length of wire so the Cat Eye that counted the wheel revolutions could reach to BJ's extended front wheel. It was a complicated procedure, and I hadn't realised how time-consuming it would be.

I began walking from my yellow mark on the road, and within minutes hit the start of Greenmount Hill. As I climbed, I crossed the dual carriageway a couple

of times till the sidewalk ran out, then stayed on the central median, made of raised inlaid bricks, the rest of the way. I reached the top in just under an hour! The road beyond was undulating, at times very hilly. I decided to walk the hills and run the downs and flats, trying to make things a bit easier for myself.

The sun had burned off the overcast cloud from the morning, and the temperature quickly soared to 30 degrees Celsius again.

There were very few houses for the first 10km and none whatsoever for the rest of the day. As I passed John Forrest National Park on the left, I peered in at the hundreds of tall thin gum trees with thicker trunks sporadically spaced between them, and small bush palms on the ground. The shoulders of the road soon gave way to bright red dirt. To me, this was Australia – gum trees, red earth and a bright blue sky. It was totally how had I expected things to look out in the country; I was just surprised to see it so soon. A kangaroo hopping past would have completed the picture.

Not having a routine made things really hard. I'd take breaks any time, lying on the ground at the side of the road with my feet elevated on BJ. And refilling my water bottle took way too long. I would put my water bottle on the ground, holding it between my feet so it wouldn't tip over. I'd unscrew the cap of my 10-litre water bladder while balancing it in my arms, trying not to spill any water. Then I'd bend over and aim, hoping at least some of the water hit the target. It was like attempting a squat pee into a test-tube. It went everywhere.

I arrived at The Lakes by midday, in just under five hours. The Ex-Lakes would have been a better name: I saw only a lake-shaped depression behind the roadhouse, nestled in a grove of gum trees where the road to York forked to the right.

I lay down on the ground in the picnic area behind the roadhouse, with my feet up on the seat of a picnic table. I was disappointed with my time and the fact that I had walked some of the way. Ironically, when I called Peter and Marina to pick me up, they were impressed that I'd "made such good time!" I stretched while I waited, and massaged my legs, trying to knead out the soreness. I ached all over. It felt like a hot rod was poking into my neck muscles and shoulders, my lower back was stiff and sore, and my feet were killing me. I could feel new blisters, and the ones from the day before were now even bigger. I wasn't even wearing new shoes; I'd bought them weeks earlier so I could break them in during my training. I had been running several hours a day in these shoes and hadn't had even a tiny blister. This was not how I had expected it to be... so hard... and so soon. *How the hell am I going to survive four months of this?*

When we got back to the house, I slept for a couple of hours, then got up to take a call from Jez. It had been a 'killer day', I told him. I missed him desperately and wanted to share all of my feelings. He seemed disappointed that I'd walked some of the day, and also that I had considered decreasing my daily mileage slightly. The next day I'd be heading off completely on my own, fully loaded, and I wanted reassurance! I'd done over 60km less than a week after the London

Marathon, and I thought that was damn good! Jez knew how important this goal was to me. Just before I had got onto the plane to Perth, he had asked me what he should do if the moment ever came when, dare he even suggest it, I wanted to give up.

"You have to do whatever it takes," I had said. "Do whatever it takes to make sure that I keep going until I get to Sydney."

And I had made him promise. Now, perhaps, my expectations, and his, had been too great.

It was the last night at Peter and Marina's. The next day I'd be on my own, and I wanted to be organised. I really thought I had brought only bare essentials, but the mess in the living room suggested otherwise. In one pile was the tent, sleeping bag, silk sleeping bag liner, a Therm-a-rest inflatable mattress, a blow-up travel pillow, and toiletries (shampoo, conditioner, toothbrush, toothpaste, deo, soap and tampons). Then the clothes: two each of running pants, running shorts, travel undies, bras, long-sleeved running tops, singlets and running shoes, plus a t-shirt, a fleece jacket, travel pants, woollen socks, hat, sunglasses, waterproof rain jacket, cotton long-sleeved shirt, and four pairs of '1000 Mile' socks. Also there were two tubs of Vaseline, orthotics (posture-correcting shoe inserts), my alarm clock, a Swiss Army knife, a Petzl head torch and Mini Maglite, a bag of Compeed blister plasters, my Walkman with four cassettes, a water bottle, two empty 10-litre water bladders, diary, three books to read, writing paper, money belt, tyre pump, extra tubes, puncture kit, six bottles of Goanna Oil, insect repellent, six bottles of both multivitamins and antioxidants (donated by Herron Pharmaceuticals), my collapsible bowl, tin cup, knife, spoon, fork, toilet paper, sunscreen, a small first-aid kit, tensor bandage and maps. Food consisted of a bag of nuts, a big container of salt, some apples and kiwi fruit, a bag of rice-cakes, a box of muesli bars, a jar of peanut butter, and a 500ml bottle of raspberry cordial.

There was just too much stuff! The tent, sleeping bag and Therm-a-rest alone took up most of the backpack. I packed and repacked, but to no avail. Marina suggested strapping the tent, the biggest item, under BJ with some old belts. We tried it a few ways and settled with it near the front wheel under the footrest in front of the basket. It worked well. With more room in my backpack, I began again. I threw similar items (sleeping gear, running gear, toiletries, stuff for my feet, and so on) into several different size stuff sacks, dispensing the vitamins and tampons into zip-lock baggies, ditching one of the Vaseline tubs and all but one of the Goanna Oils. Then, starting with the largest items first, I crammed what I could into the backpack and wedged it sideways in the seat of the pram. Everything else went into a knapsack attached to the side of the backpack with a bung cord.

It took all night to sort everything out and I finally dragged myself to bed at 3:30am. Two hours later I woke up feeling utterly exhausted. It was time to go.