

My Most Unforgettable Marathon

(And What I Learned From It)

BY RACHEL TOOR

NEW YORK, NY, November 5, 2001. One of the questions I most dread: what is your favorite (most influential, most unforgettable) book? First my mind goes absolutely, blindingly, white-page blank. Then it spins, whirs, twirls—you can smell the burn. Where to begin? At the beginning? With *Green Eggs and Ham*? Or *Where the Wild Things Are*? Do you skip the first loves and move right along to the substantial, long-term relationships, the ones that continue to change—deepen and thicken—over time?

Each year I re-read James Joyce's short story "The Dead." Each year I get something new and different from it. I don't travel far from my dog-eared copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and I need a rubber band to hold together *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, my favorite collection of Wallace Stevens's poems. Since Stevens's lines run through my mind the way other people are tortured by teenage pop music or annoying commercial jingles, since I can't get them out of my brain, pieces of poetry popping up unbidden at unexpected places and times, does that make this my most unforgettable book? Perhaps. But then I think of another Wallace—Stegner—and the way some of the ideas in his beautiful *Angle of Repose* return to haunt me.

Maybe what's memorable is what you do for others. I've given a copy of Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*—a book that captures with humor and trenchant insight the flummoxedness of being male—to every man I've ever loved. It's a book that each of them has loved, a quintessential boy book. But then, there are the girls: Jane and the Brontes. There's George Eliot, whose *Middlemarch*, Virginia Woolf said, was the first novel written for grown-ups. Oh, the divine Virginia. No *Mrs. Dalloway* for me. I prefer *To the Lighthouse*, but more, I love her *Flush*, a book of wit and wisdom, the biography of the dog (a cocker spaniel) that tells the story of how Elizabeth Barrett became Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Lest you think I'm a highbrow snob, let me tell you that I couldn't do without my murder mysteries: Ruth Rendell, whether she is writing under her own name or utilizing the nom de plume Barbara Vine to write the edgier, harsher,

psychological mysteries. Lawrence Block, Michael Connelly, Elizabeth George, Dennis Lehane, Harlan Coben, John Sandford—can't take a flight without them. Often I take them to bed.

How do you reckon the star that shines most brightly, the fairest of them all? How do you measure meaning, quantify quality? As with books, so too with races.

AS WITH BOOKS, SO TOO WITH RACES

To start at the beginning would be an obvious gambit since that is, after all, where the learning curve is steepest and therefore most interesting. I was told by Peter, who mentored me early in my salad days of running, that it didn't make sense to do a marathon if you couldn't run it in less than three and a half hours. Too hard on the body, he claimed. (You know runners like Peter. I know you do. You may even be one, you hard-core speed freak.) I was too naive at that point to decode this statement. I went to Camp Lejeune to run my first marathon accompanied by my ex-boyfriend Andrew and my best friend, Val. There were 20-mile-an-hour head winds on a course that was as attractive as a jarhead's haircut. I crossed the finish line crying for IV fluids. I was ashamed, disappointed, and grouchy. I was also surprised to learn I had gotten an age-group award and had qualified for Boston. Sometimes what looks like failure, isn't. It just feels that way. A good lesson but one that is unfortunately easy to forget.

Was it one of the Bostons that takes the cake? The first where I went up with two ex-boyfriends—Andrew and Mike. (We are an odd but comfortable triumvirate, me and the boys.) Andrew rented a sport utility vehicle because, he said, this was a sporting event. On the plane we met two guys—Dave and Tony—from our 'hood, also running, so we gave them a ride in from the airport to the Haynes Convention Center. Andrew is a bad driver in the best of circumstances, and anyone who has ever driven in Boston knows that Beantown driving circumstances are at best trying. I tried tactfully to direct him (“Watch out for the *^#\$ pedestrians! You're driving off the @#\$*&^ road! You're the world's worst driver!”), and Mike attempted to keep us calm. Dave and Tony still talk about that car trip.

THE BEFORE AND AFTER

Was any one of those runs from Hopkinton to the Hub more memorable than the others? The races blend together; it's the before and after that stand out. Like the time I stayed with the parents of a student whose application to Duke I had read when I worked as an admissions officer. The mom, a Mia Farrow-esque gracious lady, greeted me at the end of the race at the door of their large apartment on Commonwealth Avenue, just around the corner from the finish with: “Oh Rachel, you're done much earlier than I expected.” Then she drew me a bath the size of

a small bedroom filled with potions from Canyon Ranch and brought me drinks and fruit and told me how impressed she was with me.

You can't do much better than that for postrace fluffing. After I climbed out of the lap of luxury, I walked back over to the finish. I watched people finishing as five hours showed on the clock. While for some it did look hard, others were clearly elated and having a wonderful time. Unlike the last few silent miles I had run with my cohort, these folks were still yukking it up, still stopping to take photos, still happy. Life at the back of the pack is different, I saw. Not better, not worse. Different. There's a lesson for you.

Maybe my most unforgettable was the Boston where I spent two hours at the *Running Times* expo booth standing over Bill Rodgers's shoulder while he signed autographs. The line snaked for miles, and I was charged with trying to keep it moving. Fat chance. A guy would come up to Bill, poster in hand, ready for signing, and say: "I ran in the same 10K as you in Tiny Town, Illinois, in 1983." Bill would get that dopey look he often wears. He would blink, think for a minute and say: "Yeah, Tiny Town. It was really hot that day (the guy would nod enthusiastically), and I was racing against Frank (nodding frantically now), and then there was a last turn into town, and that's where I took him."

Then Boston Billy would look the guy dead in the eye, and you would have thought the race was yesterday—or that he and the man from Tiny Town had been best friends for the intervening years. I watched as Bill did this again and again, with every person, remembering folks he had met this way years earlier. I sat at the feet of the master, and though I never ask for autographs, at the end of the day I asked him to sign my race number. It still says: "Rachel. Run fast. Write lots. Bill Rodgers." Good advice from a good man. I ran 3:18 that Monday. Not my best but not bad for me.

Winning is an easy way to make a race unforgettable. I was in California for a summer (as close readers of this publication may remember) and ran a tiny trail marathon in Nevada City. I surprised myself by winning it—and surprised the locals as well. I know this because one of them made it his business to find out who I was. He was friendly, chatty, and seemed like a good runner. Only later did I learn of Rae Clark's bona fides. A marathon for him was a sprint. He held records for ultradistance running on the track. Meeting a legend and not knowing it at the time and asking retrospectively embarrassing questions ("Do you run much? Have you done many marathons?")—well, that's kind of hard to forget.

AND THEN THERE ARE THE ULTRAS

I drive a reminder of my first ultra. I went to visit my brother and sister-in-law in Charleston, West Virginia, and ran the Rattlesnake 50K. It was a Three Stooges kind of day—everything that could go wrong, did. Starting with my not waking

up on time; driving too fast to get to the race; driving right off the road and popping a tire; thinking I was going to have to run to the start (but thankfully was picked up by another runner); getting into a political argument with a guy on the course and then running off the course and adding a couple of miles; falling three times (including once on my head); and finishing messed up enough to win “Best Blood.” Thankfully my family was there at the end, and my brother took care of my car while I scraped the blood and mud off of my pathetic self. It took him a very long time to take care of the car, and when he came back he was driving a car that was not mine. “We decided to get you a new car,” he said.

Traveling with friends to races is always—well, memorable. Ralph, Scott, Jim, and I went to Oregon for the Mount Hood 50K and 50-miler. Ralph and I were doing the K, Jim and Scott the miler. That part was easy. Harder was that before the race we all wanted to do different things. Jim wanted to go to a used-record store in Portland. I had a jones to go to Powell’s Books. Scott and Ralph had their eyes on the Ponzi Winery. Scott was driving, so at 9:45 A.M. we were sitting outside, waiting for the doors to open for a wine tasting. Scott and Ralph tasted, Jim and I sat on the floor. We went to the record place and poked around. Then we spent hours in Powell’s, all finding their own sections and losing themselves there. It was a fun road trip, and the race was beautiful and well organized. What more could you ask for?

A handsome man. I flirted through the first 20 miles of my first 50-miler. At the start of the Mountain Masochist, I met a guy. We chatted for the first few predawn miles. When it got light, I saw that he was tall, dark, and handsome. And smart and funny. And had more stories than I and shared them freely, and gosh, for 20 miles it was like being on the world’s best first date. Eric had bagged the international age-group record in his first marathon: 2:48. At age 11. He repeated at age 12. Then he went to Harvard to row crew. He got an MBA from Wharton and now was training for an Ironman. I wanted to marry him. He was starting slow and finishing strong, so he left me after 20 heart-fluttering miles. But a woman had heard someone call me by my name and said that she had seen that I was entered and had been hoping to meet me. Hoping to meet me? Turns out, she had read everything I had written—both about running and higher education—and went on to say such nice things about my work that I felt like I could have run for days, fueled by fluffing. Turns out, she was as smart and funny as my boy Eric, and we had a grand time together. Sophie has become a good friend.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

I had decided I was about done with road marathons last spring when I was asked to lead a pace group for the inaugural More Marathon, the first-ever marathon only for women over 40. I couldn’t say no, especially as I would be taking the

3:50 (read: Boston qualifying time) group. I wanted to say no—it was five laps of Central Park. But when I saw all these strong, fit women ready to run, I knew that this would be a memorable experience. When we passed (five times) a guy holding a sign that said “You don’t look a day over 29,” I said, “No. This is what 40—or 42, or 52, or 81 looks like. Strong, fit, and yes, beautiful.”

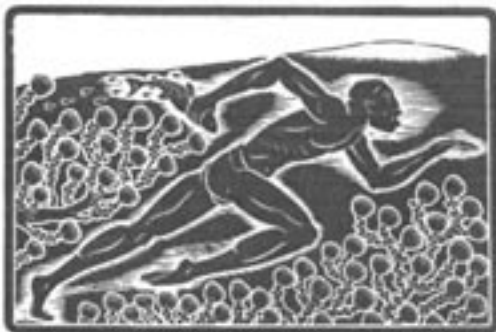
We ran past Roger Robinson, a world-class runner and writer. After hearing him shout out kind words about an article I had just done for *Running Times*, I felt like I could lead my women to Albany, to Canada even. (Are you getting the idea here? I respond well to fluffing? Give me fluffing!)

Then I heard Roger’s wife call my name, and I was filled with emotion. Kathrine Switzer is an iconic figure for us women marathoners: Jock Semple trying to pull her off the course after she had shed her hooded shirt to become the first woman to run Boston is an indelible image for many of us. She paved the way—with beauty and grace and strength and guts—and became the perfect ambassador for

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the sport. I pointed her out to my women, but they didn't need me to—they knew exactly who she was. We were all fueled by Kathrine's presence.

Then we got giddy. At mile 23, we started singing show tunes. One of the women could sing "Doe, a Deer" in Spanish. My group crossed the line in 3:48:59. I had run the whole thing holding a stick with my pace-group balloons on it. It was a windy day and the balloons kept bonking me on the head. Toward the end of the race, I used them to shoo runners coming in the opposite direction (the park was open) out of the way. Afterward, I didn't want to put down my balloons. I wanted to hold on to that unforgettable experience.

But, if I had to pick one race, the most unforgettable, it would be the New York City Marathon. Not the year I actually *ran* it. The year before.

NOVEMBER 2001

I was training for a December marathon and happened to be in the city the weekend of New York. I decided that I would do a 20-mile run at marathon pace, jumping into the race in Park Slope, Brooklyn, my former stomping grounds. Make no mistake: I do not approve of bandits. Running without a number may be a time-honored tradition in Boston, but then so is driving like a maniac. That doesn't make it acceptable in other places. I decided I would take no aid along the course and would bail out long before the finish line. And I had a secret plan to make myself feel less like a bandit.

My friend Sarah and I walked down from her apartment to Fourth Avenue. I had done the math to know what time I had to be there to join those who were running my pace. Just as I was saying good-bye to Sarah and was about to jump into the race, I heard my name. It was my ex-husband's best friend from childhood. I had not seen him for a long time, and we had a lot of catching up to do. By the time we caught up, it was too late for me to catch the folks who were clicking off 7:30s. I started to run and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, but it was a game of weaving and wending through the crowd.

It was hard to concentrate on running. I have always had a guilty conscience (unfounded, I swear), and often my heartbeat quickens when I see a police officer, assuming that I'm about to get busted for something. It was different now in November 2001, in New York City. Now the cops were our heroes. They were there to serve, even if they were not able to protect—who could protect us from the unimaginable?

The city was raw. It has always had a gritty, definitional urbanness. New York is the ne plus ultra of cities. But it was different now. You could still smell the smoke: rancid, charry air mixed with the fall colors. When you looked downtown, you saw what was not there; you could no longer orient yourself to the south by the buildings that used to tower over all others.

I needed to be there. I flew up from my home in Durham, North Carolina, and stayed with my friend Val—hugging her, touching her, rejoicing that a few years before she had left her job in the World Trade Center and now worked in midtown. She had called me from her office that morning, narrating what she could see of horrors only a few miles away. I passed through Grand Central Station on my way to her apartment. There was a large bulletin board where the “missing” notices were posted. You couldn’t stand to look at them, and you couldn’t stand not to look. Some were hastily handwritten in broken English, others finessed by scanned photographs and carefully articulated descriptions of a husband, wife, partner, son, daughter, friend.

Conversations with friends and strangers started the same way: where were you when? I was 500 miles away, glued, like the rest of the nation, to TV coverage that felt uncomfortably like some cheesy disaster movie that wouldn’t end. Manhattan seemed both far away and around the corner. Being back, talking with friends, catastrophe was tangible, you could smell it. Where were you when? The need to tell the stories was as strong as the desire to bear witness. Where were you when?

Something else was different, as different as seeing American flags draped everywhere, of cynical lefties flying patriotic colors, as different as understanding that our world would never be the same. People had changed. The vaunted New York chilliness, the city where almost 40 years ago people heard Kitty Genovese being killed but did nothing to stop it, the place where suited-and-tied business people stepped unseeingly over homeless people, where you could live in an apartment building for decades and not know one of your neighbors, had been transformed. Community was built out of the ashes of the magnificently tall buildings that had fallen. When I remarked to a friend that there were lots of American flags flying in North Carolina but not nearly as many as on his street in Brooklyn, he said, flatly, “It was our town they attacked.” New York City had become a town.

THE PLAN

I ran my way through the crowds, trying to be unobtrusive. At mile 20, I saw her. I had decided it would be a woman. That was part of the plan. I heard her say to a guy she had been running with, “I’m fine, go ahead.” She was smiling, and running strong. I sidled up to her.

“You know what they say about The Wall at mile 20?”

“Yes?” She looked apprehensive.

“It’s a myth. No such thing. Don’t worry about it.”

She smiled. She laughed.

“I’m Rachel,” I said.

Her name was Liz. It was written on her shirt. This was her first marathon. She was the mother of three, lived in the suburbs, and had been training for the race

by herself. “It’s something I wanted to do just for me,” she said. “It’s a special time in my day, the time I get to run.”

Her husband and children had VIP seats at the finish and would be waiting for her there, she said. She was feeling pretty good, she said, though getting a little tired. I asked what her husband did, and when she told me that he was a financial guy who worked in the city, I waited. She told me the story: the hours of waiting to hear, the relief in getting a reassuring phone call. We talked about that day in September, the same conversations but somehow different. Our running this race was a way of celebrating.

The cheers of Wellesley students paled in comparison with the screams of marathoners when they passed by fire brigades. For once, the race wasn’t about the runners but about those whose strength and courage and endurance made our efforts look trivial. We cheered for them as we passed, and they cheered us right back. The firefighters, human memorials, gave us support and energy.

But not enough to counteract the sobering effect of knowing whom we were running with. Too many people wore signs that read “In memory of ____.” “In honor of ____.” They told their stories on their backs: “I trained to run this race with my dad. I love you, Dad. I miss you. 9-11.”

Photographs. Names. Tears.

But we ran to celebrate. We ran to get away from the knowledge we carried with us, saturating us as cloyingly as the smoke that clung to our clothes. We talked, Liz and I. She told me about her family, her kids. As the miles ticked by and Liz began to tire, I talked. I told her stories from my wacky life. I confessed to this soccer mom that without my ex-boyfriends I would subsist entirely on popcorn, neither able nor willing to cook for myself. I regaled her with stories of Emma, the Vietnamese potbellied pig that Andrew and I had gotten years after we had broken up, told how we co-parented the little force of nature and how her behavior changed depending on whose house she was at (with me, she was the very picture of porcine deportment; at Andrew’s she was a spoiled-rotten little swine).

I talked to her about the job I had quit, told tales from the front lines of the college admissions battle. Her kids were still young enough for her not to be overly worried but old enough for her to want to know the scoop. I told her that I had written a book on college admissions and that I still lived in Durham.

I encouraged her as we ran, gave little pointers (try not to clench your fists, drink more water), but generally I did what I do best: babble. An effortless, endless stream of words issued from my mouth, some better and funnier than others.

We crossed from the Bronx into Spanish Harlem, cheered by legions of spectators in a variety of languages. We ran down Fifth Avenue comfortably, companionably. Just before the course took a right turn into Central Park, I told Liz that she was doing great and that I was going to keep heading down Fifth, that I didn’t want to go near their finish line.

“DON'T LEAVE ME!”

She screamed it out and grabbed a fistful of the back of my shirt.

“OK, OK,” I said, surprised by her vehemence and trying to figure out where the course went from here. We were in the park now—but would soon, I realized, spill back out onto the street, to run on Central Park South. I could still bail at Columbus Circle, leaving Liz with less than a half mile to the finish.

We ran past a clock.

When we first started running together, I asked what her goal was.

“To finish,” is what she said. Of course, that’s what she said. She’s a woman.

“No, really,” I said, “how fast do you want to run this thing?”

She demurred, but I pushed her hard and she conceded that her dream was to break four hours.

At that point, I had no idea what kind of pace we were on. When I saw the clock at mile 24, I knew that she could do it.

“Listen to me,” I said to Liz. “Focus your eyes on my back and just follow. Stay with me. Don’t think about anything except following me.”

She was getting to the point in the marathon where you lose the ability to speak in complete sentences, but she grunted assent.

I picked up the pace and began to slink through openings created by the space between other runners. It was still amazingly crowded, and we had to make our way through struggling, slowing bodies. I paved the way and Liz followed.

I would cast a glance over my shoulder to make sure she was still there. She was.

“You OK?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Stay with me.”

“OK.”

One thing about women: they often take direction well. We came out onto Central Park South, the last straightaway before the turn back into the park.

“Liz, listen. You can make it under four. You’ve run your first marathon, and you’re going to do it in under four hours. Don’t slow down. I have to leave you here, but you’ve got it. It’s in the bag. Just go.”

“Thank you, thank you,” she said, and she went.

I ducked under the barricade and headed south. I had another two miles to get back to Val’s apartment, but I had accomplished my mission. I told myself that if I was going to use the race for my own training purposes without actually entering it, I would find a way to give back. Liz’s desperate cry when I told her I was going to leave convinced me that I had done my part, a small part, a small gesture. Heading downtown in New York City in the fall of 2001, small gestures

seemed important. Caring for each other, seeing commonalities instead of differences—these were the lessons of those months after September 11.

Returning to Durham was like walking out into a blindingly sunny day after seeing a depressing matinee. No more smell of smoke, no more “missing” posters, no more first-person stories to hear of horrors and secondhand accounts of lives disrupted beyond belief.

I returned to a flashing answering machine. One of the callers said her name was Liz S. She said she had run the New York Marathon that Sunday and that when she crossed the line—in under four hours—she told her husband that at the end of the race she was so exhausted she had been hallucinating. She had read that this sometimes happened. Liz told her husband that she had imagined that an angel had come down from heaven to run the last six miles with her.

“That was no angel,” her husband laughed. “I have a photograph of the two of you running together.”

I had told her only my first name, that I lived in Durham, that I had written a book on college admissions. She tracked me down because she wanted to thank me, to thank me for helping her make her dream come true.

I listened to that message five times.

And What I Learned From It

I thought not of the smell of smoke, the impromptu shrines that had appeared all over the city, the “Portraits of Grief” section of the *New York Times* that daily told the stories of the lost. Instead I thought of how the course of the New York City Marathon goes through five boroughs, and in running it you see the flavor of neighborhoods change by the block: Irish and Italians waving their flags; Hassidic Jews, prayer-shawl fringe flapping as they clapped their hands; Spanish speakers from legions of different countries; African Americans who have lived for generations in this city; newly arrived immigrants from all over the world; Arabs, Asians, blue-blooded Park Avenue ladies, college students. They all came out to cheer us on. They cheered for Liz, and they cheered for me as I cheered for her, by her side. Our voices blended in unity, at least for a handful of hours.

