ELISE DOWNING

COASTING

RUNNING AROUND THE COAST OF BRITAIN – LIFE, LOVE AND (VERY) LOOSE PLANS

www.summersdale.com



summersdale

COASTING

Copyright © Elise Downing, 2021

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced by any means, nor transmitted, nor translated into a machine language, without the written permission of the publishers.

Elise Downing has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Condition of Sale
This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

Summersdale Publishers Ltd
Part of Octopus Publishing Group Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
LONDON
EC4Y 0DZ
UK

www.summersdale.com

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-78783-981-6

Substantial discounts on bulk quantities of Summersdale books are available to corporations, professional associations and other organizations. For details contact general enquiries: telephone: +44 (0) 1243 771107 or email: enquiries@summersdale.com.



CHAPTER 1

It was a nondescript Tuesday in early March and I was at work, looking at a road map of Great Britain and trying to work out if we could deliver something to a customer in the Scottish Highlands. I was working for a small company in London, my first job after university, and I had a secret: I hated it.

I loved my colleagues. I loved desk beers at 5 p.m. on a Friday. I loved telling people that I worked for a cool, young startup. But the actual getting up every morning and going to work bit? The thought of doing that every single day *forever more*? I feel awkward saying it because it's such a glaring cliché, but the idea of that felt completely devastating and, frankly, intolerable.

Sitting at my desk that afternoon, my mind started to wander. I found myself wondering if anybody had ever been around the whole coast of Britain before. Not ran, necessarily, just been around by any means – by bike, by car, on foot. I placed that customer's order, finished my shift, took the night bus home to

www.jimmersdale.com

my flat-share and went to bed. When I woke up in the morning, that thought was still there.

Had anybody circumnavigated our whole island before? Had they done it in one go? Had they done it alone?

I thought about the coast of Britain for a few more days after that first inkling of an idea before discussing it with anybody. I did some research and learned that quite a few people had walked and cycled and sailed around, but I couldn't find much about anybody running it at that point. Interesting, I thought.

There planted a tiny seed: perhaps it could be me.

For the few months prior I had been dating Greg. It was a completely doomed, very unhealthy, absolute non-starter of a relationship – if we can even call it that – but at the time Greg was my go-to adventure person. I had met him at an adventure festival the year before and we'd followed each other on Twitter afterwards. We were pen pals for a while until I moved to London after graduating, when we started meeting up to spend evenings wandering around Covent Garden holding hands and eating in chain restaurants.

Greg lived a few hours from London and we didn't see each other often, but we would exchange hundreds of messages every day. He had so many huge dreams and plans and ideas, and it was exciting to be around. He shared them in a way that made me feel like perhaps I was allowed to have those sorts of ideas too. I didn't have to just settle for things as they were – I could go out and make something happen. He opened my eyes to the community of people out there going on ridiculous,

www.summersdale.com

amazing human-powered journeys. Running over continents, sailing across oceans, cycling around entire planets… It was following these people, people who were just like me, really, that made me wonder if it perhaps wasn't totally out of the question for me to do something like that too.

But being with Greg wasn't all good. In fact, it was mostly pretty terrible. As the months went on, I started to suspect that perhaps the things he was telling me weren't always entirely accurate. Nothing ever quite seemed to add up, whether it was what he'd had for breakfast, where he worked, stories about his family and his friends, the swimming pool that was apparently in his garden, the businesses he said he was doing deals with, the celebrities he was supposedly hanging out with… His version of events never matched up with mine (or with anybody else's, it seemed). At first I just put it down to misunderstandings, but after a while I started to feel like I was going mad. I was living in a fog and I couldn't break through to anything that made sense.

It's confusing to look back on. Our whole relationship was so miserable, but without Greg opening my eyes to all this adventure and possibility, and without the motivation of wanting to impress him (however much I hate to admit that), would I have dared to go and run around a country? Would I have even wanted to? I'm not sure.

Is it worth spending month after month crying on buses, on trains, on friends, in the toilets at work, in the pub, unable to shake that impenetrable feeling of doom and inadequacy and utter confusion, if in the midst of it you make the best decision of your life? Is it worth losing yourself completely for a year, for longer, if it leads to you doing the thing you're most proud of?

www.summersdale.com

I've thought about it a lot, and I'm still not sure. But that's how it was.

Greg was the first person I talked to about my idea. I messaged him on the way to work one morning and told him there was something that I was thinking about.

"It's about 5,000 miles," I texted. "Maybe I could do it in a few years? I need to save up, and train, and well, you know, figure out what on earth I'm doing. But perhaps in a few years I could do this thing? What do you think?"

"Set off in November," he replied. "Go then, in six months' time, or you'll never go at all."

Right. Okay then.

Now, memories of Greg live firmly in the Very Negative Experience box. It took a while, but the lid is shut. It's hard, looking back at that time, to sift through all the sadness and pull out any positives. But if I'm trying hard to be objective, this was something that Greg got right. If he hadn't told me to go sooner, and I hadn't so readily agreed, I'm almost certain that I wouldn't be sitting here now writing this story. If I'd waited, allowed time for all that preparation, I never would have gone at all.

Six months – that was long enough, right? I moved out of the too expensive flat I shared with a friend and took a room in a house with six others instead. The savings from this alone would be enough to get me round the coast, I thought. (I was wrong about this it turns out, very wrong, but we can talk about that later.) Six months was plenty long enough to

www.summersdale.com

research some kit and look at a few maps. And to learn how to run a long way, perhaps – something I had never done before.

November 1st. It had a ring to it. No matter that I'd be staring right down the barrel of a grim English winter, this was it.

I told my parents next, who seemed a bit bemused. I'm sure they thought that this was just another of my many ridiculous ideas that would never happen. And I can't blame them really. I would call them on pretty much a daily basis to announce yet another new career plan: banker, MI5 agent, social worker, baker, physiotherapist… this was just another one to add to the list.

Next I told my boss, then my best friends. We were in a pub garden at the end of a night out and it just came out. It probably goes down as one of my weirder drunken confessions, and that's saying a lot. They definitely thought it was ridiculous. My brother Chris was the most confused though. He was the sporty one in our family and has been running competitively since he was eight years old. He definitely hadn't seen this coming.

I don't think there was anybody to whom this felt like the natural, obvious next step for me.

www.summersdale.com

You see, I was completely unqualified to be setting off on a 5,000-mile run. Just writing it down, even now after I've actually done the thing, it sounds barbaric. When I tell people about it now, having done it, they immediately get the wrong idea about my athletic abilities. No, really, honestly, I'm not a very good runner, I tell them, and I definitely wasn't then. It sounds like I'm just being modest, but it's the truth.

I had been running for less than three years at the point I decided to run around the country. On New Year's Day 2013, I sat down to write resolutions with my cousin, and one of mine

was to run a half marathon. It felt like an unfathomably long way. The thought of running for more than 2 hours without stopping… I couldn't get my head around that being something my legs would ever be able to do.

I was obsessed with the "not stopping" part, which is ironic really given that so much of ultrarunning, and especially adventure running, is all about the stopping. Stop for a picture, for a sandwich, to refill your water, for snacks, for a chat, to read a map, for more snacks. It's just a moving picnic, really. But back then, all my achievements were framed by this idea of not stopping.

I was living in Sweden at the time, studying in Gothenburg on my year abroad, and the temperature hung around –10°C, or lower, for most of the winter. I didn't have any proper running kit and, Scandinavia being as notoriously expensive as it is, I couldn't afford to buy any. I set off for my first run in early January wearing two pairs of old cotton leggings, a sweatshirt from a charity shop, a bulky rain coat and pink knitted gloves. I didn't even have a digital watch, let alone any kind of GPS device. There's a picture of me somewhere running my first 10K race that March, wearing that faded old sweatshirt and squinting through the sweat in my eyes at my analogue watch face to see if I was going to make it home in under the one-hour mark.

www.summersdale.com

From the very beginning running felt hard, but it also felt like a kind of magic. It was the way the impossible could become possible so tangibly, so quickly, before your eyes, with just a little bit of work. I hadn't experienced that before with anything else. I couldn't run a mile, and then I could. I couldn't run 5 km, and then I could. I became obsessed with reading about

running, and my ambitions started to far outweigh my talent. Before I'd even finished my first half marathon, the original goal, I was already imagining myself running marathons, even ultramarathons. It's hard to explain: it simultaneously felt utterly ridiculous and completely inevitable.

If only my dedication to doing the training had matched my enthusiasm for reading about it and talking about it. I found myself standing on the start line of the Great Birmingham Run in October having barely run for months. I got around – without stopping, most importantly, of course – and immediately started thinking about running a full marathon. I told people I was doing it to raise money for charity but, really, I think I just wanted to be able to say I'd run a marathon. And I definitely wanted to tell people I'd done it a lot more than I actually wanted to do it, even if that's not a particularly honourable motivation to admit to.

Whatever the reason, I signed up to run the Milton Keynes Marathon the following May, which would be just over a year since I'd made that New Year's resolution, six months on from the first half marathon, and – although I couldn't possibly have predicted it then – 18 months before I set off to run approximately 200 marathons around the coast. Looking back at those timescales, I can see why everybody was a bit confused.

Marathon morning dawned three days after my university dissertation hand-in date. I had spent pretty much a week solid in the library living on Haribo, energy drinks and McDonald's, and I was still a bit hungover from the celebratory night out. I couldn't tell you the last time I'd been for a run. On the drive to the race start we listened to my dad's favourite country CD and "Me and Bobby McGee" came on. Kenny Rogers sang

www.summersdale.com

about freedom just being another word for having nothing left to lose, which felt fitting.

To make matters worse, I was dressed as a purple Crayola crayon. My dad, reluctantly having succumbed to my pleas that fancy dress would help us raise more money, was wearing fairy wings and a tutu.

I had never run far enough to discover chafing before then. I didn't understand about fuelling and I attempted to run the whole thing on just water. I walked for a solid 8 miles of the race, sobbing, and a small child in the crowd shouted "Crying crayon" at me. The heckling didn't stop there: as I ran on the closed lane of a dual carriageway (side note: if you don't like dual carriageways and roundabouts, I probably wouldn't recommend the Milton Keynes Marathon), a car of boys yelled "Run fatty run" at me out of the window as they drove past, which felt unnecessary. As I approached the final mile, well over 5 hours after starting, somebody sprinted past me wearing flip-flops.

It wasn't a pleasant experience. Certainly not one that would make you want to abandon everything to go and spend ten months of your life doing nothing but running, that's for sure.

www.summersdale.com

As I started to tell people about this stupid idea to run a lap of the country, I was just waiting for somebody to confront me with the truth. "You fraud," they'd say, "you big, big fraud. You barely managed to finish a marathon! You're the crying crayon! What makes you think you can entertain the idea of doing this thing. Nobody else has done it before, what makes you think it's even possible?"

These days I live in a bubble of people who spend every minute of their free time going on ridiculous runs and

climbing mountains in terrible weather and cycling triple-digit distances, but at the time it wasn't something any of my friends were really doing. A few months before my November start date, I saw a Facebook post from Dave Cornthwaite inviting strangers to come camping with him in the woods. Dave is best known for "Expedition1000", his project to complete 25 journeys of 1,000 miles or more via different non-motorised modes of transport. That year, he was having a summer off from adventuring, and wanted to put some faces to the names he saw on his list of Facebook followers. It was the inklings of the community that would grow into the Yes Tribe, now 16,000+ strong.

So, on a breezy Friday night in June, I packed a rucksack with an enormous heavy sleeping bag and an old foam mat, and headed off to spend the night in the woods with a group of perfect strangers. It sounded like a great opportunity to meet some people who might not think I was completely out of my mind. It also, admittedly, sounds like the opening scene of a horror movie. This only fully dawned on me as I stepped onto the platform in Wendover and saw a group of people standing around with packs and camping gear looking not particularly like serial killers – but isn't that how they always get you?

www.summersdale.com

Spoiler: they weren't serial killers.

We hiked up a hill, rolled out our bivvy bags and somebody lit a fire. As we stood around it, drinking warm cans of beer, Dave asked us all to share any adventures we were planning or projects we were working on right now. That's how I'll always remember those early days of the Yes Tribe: a place to share the things that are exciting and scary and that you

want to do despite the fact you're completely unqualified – or perhaps they're so appealing *because* of that. As we went around the circle I could hear my heart thudding in my ears, almost deafening me. I was sure they'd laugh me out of the woods. As well as Dave, there were some other bone fide Adventurers with a capital A there, like Sean Conway who had recently become the first person to complete a Land's End to John o' Groats triathlon, running, cycling and swimming the length of the country. Yep, *swimming*. What would they say when they realised I was just an idiot who couldn't even run a marathon without crying, and now I was planning to run around a whole country? It was ridiculous.

It was soon my turn.

"I'm going to run around the coast of the UK. I think it'll take me about ten months. I'm probably going to start in November," I told them. And nobody laughed at me, the opposite in fact, they couldn't have been more encouraging. I obviously hadn't told them about the whole crying crayon incident or the fact I had no idea what I was doing, so that might have helped, but still. Everybody just said nice things and Dave asked how I'd be sharing it. I hadn't really thought about that before, but I went home and made a Facebook page and suddenly it felt like this was a thing. A real thing. A thing that I was doing.

www.summersdale.com

Not everybody had quite so much faith in me.

September came and I was 20 miles into my first ultramarathon with my friend Sophie. We were lost somewhere in Hertfordshire. Sophie was a few metres ahead, and I was straggling behind trying to cry without her noticing. For some reason we hadn't felt the need to do any substantial preparation

at all, despite the fact I'd entered the race thinking it would be a good build-up to the coast. My "training" had consisted of a few 5 km jogs and one 16-mile run the week before the race, but I'd read a blog where somebody had talked about running 100 km "with their mind", so I assumed I'd be able to do the same. I was wrong. Sophie, generally being much fitter than me and with a history of competitive sport to fall back on, was pulling this tactic off a lot more successfully. She wasn't crying, for one.

As I limped along, I was texting Greg. The fact that I was running and texting probably tells you everything you need to know about the pace we were moving at. "I can't do it," I told him. "I want to quit. I don't think I can go much further."

"If you pull out of this, I don't think it bodes well for you running around the coast," he replied.

Again, when you finally stop looking at somebody through rose-tinted glasses, it can become hard to sift through all the awful memories of them and pluck out the times that perhaps they were being genuine. But on this one, he probably did have a point. It wasn't the first time I'd heard it, either. A few weeks earlier Sophie's boyfriend had asked why I thought I'd be able to stick at a ten-month run when I couldn't even be bothered to train properly for this one race. It was a valid question, and one to which I didn't really have an answer.

I pulled out at the next checkpoint. It was in a graveyard and I sat sobbing on the ground while a couple got married on the other side of the church. I had so badly wanted to finish that race, to prove a point, but whether you run an ultramarathon with your legs or your head, clearly I wasn't strong enough in either.

www.summersdale.com

I was setting off to run 5,000 miles in less than six weeks. If I couldn't finish this one race, what right did I have to even start that adventure?

I had always thought of myself as not much of a crier but in those few weeks before setting off, I seemed to do little else. In the pictures from my work leaving drinks, my face is so wet from tears that it looks almost blurry. I went to Yestival, the festival Dave had set up for the Yes Tribe, which had exploded after a summer of campouts and outdoor activities, and I spent most of my time there crying too. At the end Dave made me stand up on stage and tell everybody what I was planning to do. It suddenly felt very real and truly horrifying.

It was ridiculous. I knew that I was so lucky to be in a position where I could abandon my whole life for ten months on a whim, but it all felt so unknown. I had decided to do this thing, nobody was forcing me, and it should have been exciting but I didn't feel excited at all. I just wanted to change my mind and go back to work and say it was all a big mistake. It would be embarrassing, sure, and my friends would never let me live it down, but perhaps it would be less embarrassing than quitting in a week or a month's time? Better to save face by not even trying, than to give something a go and then have to admit you weren't up to it, surely?

I finished work two weeks before starting the run. I moved out of my shared house in London and took all of my stuff back to my parents', where I was staying until I set off. I think the idea was that I'd spend that time doing any last bits of

www.summersdale.com

planning, sorting my kit out, generally just getting ready. In reality, I didn't do anything useful. I didn't know what I was meant to do.

Several times over the preceding months, I had sat in front of a blank page ready to make a plan but, honestly, I didn't know what that actually involved. I had no idea how far I'd be able to cover at that stage, so it seemed pointless to write out an itinerary of any kind. The route wouldn't be an issue either – I just needed to keep the sea to my left, surely. There were no vaccines to get, no foreign languages or new cultures to read up on, no complicated logistics to get to the start line. All I had to do was take a train from my parents' in Northampton to Greenwich, where I was starting. In a bid to have something to post on my new website, I took a map of Great Britain and painstakingly drew a red line around it using Paint, and then made a Facebook event for the first day in case anybody wanted to join me, and that was it. Done.

My mum said, many times, that she preferred it before I had arrived back home. She liked it better when I was still in London and she didn't have to face the reality of quite how disorganised I was. Sitting here, writing this several years later, I can see that she may have had a point. I've since morphed into an aggressive and passionate planner of all things. I plan more for a 5K run in the park now than I did for that whole trip. It makes me feel a bit itchy remembering how haphazard it all was, but I really didn't see what else there was to do.

www.summersdale.com

On Sunday 1st of November I took the train to London and waited with my parents outside the National Maritime Museum to see if anybody else was going to show up to run with me. There wasn't anything particularly meaningful about my choice to start there. I just didn't have any attachments to anywhere on the coast itself and figured I'd have to come in to cross the Thames at some point anyway, so may as well start in London. A friend had pointed out that the museum was fitting, with its connection to the sea, and that was it decided.

The plan was to run 17 miles on that first day, from Greenwich to Dartford. A few weeks earlier, I had made a Facebook event inviting people to join me for the send-off. It felt a bit presumptuous to think anybody would be interested, but I'd nervously told people to meet at half past ten to give us plenty of time to get to Dartford before dark and posted my phone number for emergencies (which, looking back, feels like a GDPR breach of my own data).

It was one of the foggiest days I can ever remember. We couldn't see more than a few feet in front of us and for about half an hour I was getting calls from people who were apparently nearby. "We're here to see you off," they were saying, "but where are you?" Sometimes I could hear them they were so close, but we still couldn't see each other. I hadn't expected simply finding the start point to be such a navigational challenge, but perhaps it was a suitable omen for what was to come. Eventually everybody found us and we hung around awkwardly for a while. I thought that I should probably say something, but I wasn't really sure what.

Fairly unceremoniously, we started. Seventeen people ran with me on that first day, plus my friends Mimi and Harriet

www.summersdale.com

who had arrived on children's scooters they'd found in Harriet's parents' garage. They lasted about 100 m before giving up and going to the pub – apparently scooting is harder than running.

The rest of us carried on along the Thames path, which was eerily quiet in the fog, heading east past some sewage works, Barking Power Station poking out of the mist on the other side of the river, shopping trolleys bobbing in the water. The time I probably should have spent doing useful preparation of some kind, I had spent baking instead, so we stopped midway for homemade rocky road and flapjacks. Everybody was pleased about this except my dad, who I was making carry the Tupperware boxes like a one-man moving aid station. People peeled off at several points, heading home for roast dinners, or to see friends, or to catch up on chores before work tomorrow. It all felt very normal and I was jealous. I never thought I'd be jealous of somebody doing their laundry on a Sunday afternoon.

The route I had planned followed the Thames to Erith and then took the A206 to Dartford. As this section wasn't technically part of the coast I didn't feel too bad about cutting a corner (as I discovered along the way, I never really did start feeling bad about that. There are lots of route purists out there, but it turns out I'm not one of them). But I think we can say that running alongside a dual carriageway isn't exactly what I'd had in mind when I'd pictured idyllic days by the seaside. My legs hurt too – 17 miles is a long way to run, after all. And my pack, which I was running with for the first time that day, had started to chafe. I laugh now thinking about how much I moaned about that thin red line of friction on my lower back. Little did I know what was to come – a blazing inferno would

www.summersdale.com

be lit over the next ten months that no amount of Body Glide could put out.

But I'd done it! Day One of the adventure was over! I was on my way! I was doing this thing! There was no turning back now!

It seemed like a worse idea than ever.

www.summersdale.com