

Just a Little Run Around the World

5 years, 3 packs of wolves
and 53 pairs of shoes



Rosie Swale Pope

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**Just a Little Run Around the
World: 5 Years, 3 Packs of
Wolves and 53 Pairs of Shoes**

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Pope R. S.

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After her husband died of cancer, 57-year-old Rosie set off to run around the world, raising money in memory of the man she loved. Followed by wolves, knocked down by a bus, confronted by bears, chased by a naked man with a gun and stranded with severe frostbite, Rosie's breathtaking 20,000-mile solo journey is as gripping as it is inspiring. Rosie's solo run around the world started out of sorrow and heartache and a wish to turn something around. Heartbroken when she lost her husband to cancer, Rosie set off from Wales with nothing but a small backpack of food and equipment, and funded by the rent from her little cottage. So began her epic 5-year journey that would take her 20,000 miles around the world, crossing Europe, Russia, Asia, Alaska, North America, Greenland, Iceland, and back into the UK. On a good day she'd run 30 miles, on a bad day she'd only manage 500 yards, digging herself out of the snow at -62 degrees C, moving her cart inches at a time. Every inch, every mile, was a triumph, a celebration of life, and 53 pairs of shoes later Rosie arrived home to jubilant crowds in Tenby, Wales. Rosie's incredible story is a mesmerizing page-turner of the run of her life. It will wake up the sleeping adventurer in you; it will inspire hope, courage and determination in you; but most of all it will convince you to live your life to the full and make every day count.

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‘Things last for ever,
not in years, but in the moments
in which they happen.’

—*Rosie Swale Pope*

For Clive, Eve and James, Pete, Jayne and Nigel and the rest of my family far and wide.

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Prologue

Siberia, January 2005

There are a hundred different types of silence in Siberia. The atmosphere becomes part of you. You can sometimes see bare white silver birches in the depth of winter hung with stars on a clear night. In the mesmerising vast forests, dusk in January begins at 2 pm. By then everything is in its hole or nest—or nearly everything.

On a cold, still night, I pull my cart that doubles as a sled, deep into the forest and find some smooth snow among the trees. I put up the tent, collect a bowl of fresh snow to take inside with me to melt on the tiny primus stove for drinks and cooking; it's the nearest thing I have to a kitchen. I have even gathered some icy tree bark from the fallen branches to make tea. The Siberian people have taught me this. It's not quite PG Tips but it's nourishing and tastes fine. Need is a great teacher. I also boil up a few handfuls of buckwheat grain to make a kind of porridge. It's a measure of the power of the silence that even a light footstep outside can make your heart stop. Something is out there.

The night birds—maybe they are jays—suddenly start screeching and chattering. Alert. Out from their hiding places. Gone is their silent vigil. They are harsh calls of warning. Then I hear the howling.

Moments later the wolf has stuck his head right into the tent. My first impression isn't one of danger or fear but of his absolute beauty. He is a great big timber wolf. His tawny head and long front legs with giant-looking furry paws are covered with drops of half-frozen snow that gleam like diamonds on his thick fur. He has a good look around, as though I should have been expecting his visit. Maybe I am. After all, this is his world.

My heart is thundering. Yet my strongest instinct is that he's not going to attack me. I have learned to trust my instinct. It's all I have. I stay quiet, but the wolf knows I'm shaken. You can't pretend to animals. They always know how you feel. Then he backs away and he's gone.

I have to go out to repair the ripped tent flap with duct tape. The moon has risen, revealing a pack of wolves waiting like grey shadows among the trees.

The next morning they have left but they come back again at the end of the day when I set up camp. I am on a desolate road that stretches for miles through the forest. I've only observed one or two vehicles over the last few days travelling to the mines in the far east of Russia. There are no houses for hundreds of miles and I wonder if these wolves have seen a human before. Perhaps I'm just part of the wildlife.

Over the next few days they disappear at daylight and reappear when I stop for the night. They never come close to the tent again or harm me. It is as if they are running with me. They always gather for the night quite a distance away. I'm uneasy—yet at the same time their presence comforts me in a way I don't quite understand. After about a week they vanish. I believe it's because I've left their terrain; I have crossed an invisible border.

These beautiful wolves with their ancient, strange ways gave me courage to think of the painful memories of why my run had begun.

On 12 June 2002 my husband Clive died in my arms of prostate cancer. I knew with a passionate conviction that I had to do something. To tell people, to remind them to please go for health checks. If Clive and I had thought about him going to the doctor earlier—perhaps he would be with me now. I had to find a way to make others listen, especially men and women who hate going to the doctor and discussing intimate things. There is no social status with cancer. I'm only an ordinary woman, but if I just stayed home doing the weeding in my backyard, nobody would have taken any notice—that's why I am running around the world, and sleeping in the cold in the forests with wolves.

If my message saves even one life—it will all have been worthwhile.

CHAPTER 1 Clive

Tenby, Wales, 2002

We thought he could beat it, just as Clive had always conquered everything. Years ago, he sailed practically everywhere in the world, delivering yachts. He sailed boats no one else could manage. He escaped from pirates on the high seas, weathered all storms. He had always been fit, and very full of life and laughter.

Clive had twinkling blue eyes in an inquisitive and happy face; you could stop to chat to him for a moment—and still be talking hours later. I met him in 1982, when I had been at a low point, struggling to get an old and ramshackle 17ft sailing boat ready to sail solo across the Atlantic. Although he was a businessman in Pembrokeshire, he couldn't stay away from the sea, and was helping out at Kelpie's Boatyard in Pembroke Dock, where he rigged my little boat. Clive had been married before like me and had two deeply loved grown-up children, Jayne and Nigel. I was also very close to Eve and James, my children from my first marriage.

After I completed my solo voyage, we had a simple wedding and nearly twenty extremely happy years together. We would walk or run down to the sea and look at the sunrise, making a golden path of light across the sea from the harbour and North Beach in Tenby where we lived.

'I think heaven isn't later,' he often said. 'Heaven's right here on this earth.'

Half-jokingly, he called doctors 'vets' as a compliment. He loved animals and admired vets who have to look after patients of *all* sizes, including strange animals. I had already run the Sahara Marathon. Clive had made a film about it and about working animals. We had visited a donkey clinic in Marrakesh after the race; my feet were blistered and Clive, worried because no doctor was available, asked their head vet to treat them. The vet had done a terrific job on his first two-legged donkey, applying soothing green cream smelling of aloe vera, normally used for girth galls, he said, while his other patients had eehowed, looking on sympathetically. The blisters healed perfectly.

All these carefree times suddenly ended. Our world changed in a way sadly known by millions but shatteringly new to us. We were unaware of cancer—not of the fearful loss, pain and grief it caused to so many, but that it can happen so easily to anybody. It seems unbelievable now.

On 26 June 2000 Clive went to see Dr Griffiths, his 'vet', at Tenby Surgery, because he had begun to have discomfort when he peed. We were shocked, devastated when the tests showed that Clive had prostate cancer.

'It's not so bad,' Dr Griffiths tried to reassure us. 'It's often one of the easiest cancers to treat. You can have prostate cancer and live to ninety—and then get run over by a bus.'

The next test, the scan, revealed it had already spread into Clive's bones. I prayed for a miracle that night; I would have done anything to have had the cancer instead of him, but Clive just said, 'I can cope with this.'

For the next year, life went on almost as normal. He responded very well to the medication and I couldn't get over his strong will. He began running on the beach, which he had actually never done before—he was not a runner. It was so hard because for a long time he wanted to keep the fact that he was ill between us and his doctors.

One day I saw he wasn't really able to jog on the beach any more but was trying to hide it. Then he stopped and put his arm around me.

'Don't cry,' he said, 'or you'll make me cry too. Be strong.'

He was well enough to go camping in Ireland in the autumn as he had longed to do. It was lovely. The Irish side of my family kept saying how well Clive looked, which made me proud but also tore me apart as I couldn't say what had been happening. Whatever he chose to do *was* the way to do it.

I remember our tent beside the misty dunes, reeds and grasses in the early morning near Rosslare Harbour, before catching the ferry back. We had such fun. Time generously stopped its

bitter headlong race; and stood still, just for a little while. It was time's gift that meant everything. Things last for ever, not in years, but in the moments in which they happen.

Clive was as full of dreams and ideas as ever. He eventually told his daughter and son, and a few more people about the cancer, and we carried on as he wanted to do. It wasn't that he didn't want to face his problem; it wasn't about achieving last dreams. Clive and I didn't believe in the word *last*. Dreams are founded on reality and facing up to trouble. We just kept on going forward, because it was the only way.

He wrote a poem, 'I Want to See the World':

I want to be a sailor, I want to roam the oceans far and wide, I want to see the islands and the far off distant lands, To listen to the music of the drum. I want to ride on camels, and elephants too, And lie on beaches basking in the sun. I want to go to India, and see the famous Tajah, Then visit Everest and its peaks...

Much later, on my world run, I realised that it was Clive who taught me that you never give yourself a break going uphill but only when you are over the top of the mountain. And that the mountains are in the mind.

Clive longed to go to Nepal. He had been born in India and his father had been in the British Army in charge of the Gurkhas. Clive had never gone back because he hadn't wanted to go as a tourist. Before his illness he had accepted an invitation by the Nepal Trust for us to trek and help them build a hospital in Humla. He still said he'd do anything to go. He also wanted to go to Cuba to make a film about a run, as he had done in the Sahara.

He very nearly made it to Cuba too. He felt better and insisted I go ahead and come back and fetch him after the run, so he could just film it in a few days. He reckoned he'd be OK for a few days away.

This was never going to happen.

Suddenly he got much worse. In January 2002, we were lying in bed together. I had been dozing and Clive pulled the duvet—that's all he did—and his arm gave a loud crack.

'I think it's broken,' he said. 'It's OK if I just lie still.'

The ambulance came. At the hospital they said that the break above the elbow was a classic sign of bone cancer spreading out of control. He was in and out of hospital until April, bravely going to physiotherapy to get back what strength he could. Doing exercises as prescribed by the doctor, with his arm in a sling. I saw it all. I went everywhere with him.

The physiotherapists were astonished he could joke. He used to say, 'Oh, I have *everything* going for me. My teeth are going, my hair's going, my eyes are going...'

On 10 April, his birthday, he ate his cake, or a bit of it. I gave him a little torch you could hold in the palm of your hand. He gave it back, saying, 'Please keep this for me.'

From soon after his birthday he was in hospital until towards the very end.

Peter Hutchinson of PHD Designs, who make the finest lightweight down clothing on earth, sent Clive a down vest weighing only 250 grams which sat on his fragile bones, giving him so much comfort.

After the arm, his hip broke. Just as they were hoping to get him walking again, the tumours in his spine caused his legs to become paralysed.

He bore it all, as everyone does, and still tried to have a laugh. When his friend Chester visited, asking if there was anything Clive needed, he replied, 'Yes, I need a fast car.'

Ward 10 Palliative and Cancer Care Ward, in our local Withybush Hospital in Haverfordwest, is a place I will never forget, of endless empathy and caring, of a lightness and kindness beyond words. Anne Barnes, a gifted and blessed cancer specialist, always wore not medical gear but bright clothes to cheer her patients up. When Clive and others were transferred to her ward she often dropped dark hints about the latest sexual orgies and parties in Ward 10 at 2am. Of course these didn't ever happen

but the thought brought a smile to her patients' faces and may have hidden their terrible pain better than the morphine.

The most dedicated nurses I have ever known let me sleep in my sleeping bag for long months, or even on the edge of Clive's bed, just holding him. One night I awoke and found Clive looking at me. He smiled and said, 'You had such a good sleep.' There was a look of pride and love in his eyes I can't express. The nurses patiently taught me how to do everything for Clive such as cleaning and washing him. It was a privilege for me to do it: I would have done anything for him.

Their policy was to enable patients to come home for the final days if the patient wished for it. I shall never forget how caringly they went about it. They even had a special hospital bed brought to our home, and round-the-clock nursing care.

Clive was so happy to see the honeysuckle he had planted and smiled at the sight of the sparrows, which he always called his 'feathered hooligans', feasting on fat balls outside the bedroom window. I had actually been training them up with extra food before he came home so they could put on a gala show. A day later, 12 June 2002, he was gone.

After all the pain and suffering, I awoke beside him feeling that a light had come on. He had been given all his strength and spirit back and was moving on.

When the kind lady doctor had been and the wonderful young Paul Sartori nurse (like our local Macmillan's nurses) had retired next door after hugging me, I just held Clive close to me all through the night. I didn't know what else to do. I held him like you might hold onto someone in a desert.

He was off on such a long journey; he might be lonely for a little while. I was on a journey too. Beginning a journey and ending a journey. I was heartbroken, and held him and looked at him all those hours; and then I knew you can only keep hold of beauty by letting it go.

He *had* won his battle right to the very end. You don't win a battle because of how it turns out. You win by the way you face it. He was up among the pirates. He was happy.

Even during this desperate fight Clive had never lost his sense of fun. My monument to him shouldn't be sorrowful, grieving or gloomy. I had to do something for Clive that would be crazy and huge. I could run some marathons for cancer awareness, I thought.

I had been looking at the map of the world on my wall, wondering if I could afford overseas marathons, when something took hold of me by the scuff of the neck; a thought broke through my grief and seized every part of my being.

I would run around the world instead.

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