

THE TORONTO MARATHON (NOTES FROM TORONTO 2021)

You haven't heard of the Toronto Marathon? No, neither have I. I certainly didn't run it. And the title isn't meant to be sarcastic, like I had to endure Toronto so badly that it felt like a marathon. Sure, there are Maple Leaf fans looking at the Stanley Cup expectantly every single year, and Torontonians who think they are representative of the whole country. But all in all, it's a nice city, a little big and too much traffic for my liking, but an interesting place to spend a long 2021 COVID semi-lockdown weekend.

So why a marathon then? Because that's about how far I walked over the course of the weekend. 42 kilometres and change according to the facts found on the internet and the distances I could trace on Google maps. 42 kilometres qualifies as a marathon! It was a great way to see downtown, to feel the vibe and naturally stop for snacks. I found myself looking at the many signs of stores and restaurants, some catchy and inventive. There was a plethora of cannabis stores, my favourite was named Mary Jane's. There was a hole in the wall style eatery called Reliable Fish and Chips. Reliable. Good to know.

One thing about downtown air that was very different than the Kanata air my nose has been smelling these past 20 years was the smell of urine. Where I was strolling it was as common as waiting for a light. No, more common than that. I'd like to say I grew used to it but that wouldn't be true. But it was a small inconvenience and I know there's a lot behind that urine. No, no, that's not what I meant.

I stayed at my sister's house near Queen and Leslie and we had lunch with my Mom, who I hadn't seen in a year, before they left and my sister went to Cambridge to dog sit for another sister. Her home was my base for the weekend. The beaches are not far so my first sizeable stroll was there. It's nice to see beaches right in a busy city. I remember how surprising it was for example, to see beaches in downtown Barcelona and I marveled how you could take the subway to the beach to swim with the kids, then walk the old quarter or some other part of a big, magnificent city later in the day. It's a nice combination. But in Toronto I was alone, so I didn't feel like swimming. Plus, it was drizzling. The beaches were not very full.

After the long walk back to my sister's house I checked my dinner options and went with a butter chicken roti dinner. I was given the choice of the level of heat and being the spice wimp that I am, I chose mild. It wasn't. I sweated more than I did on my walk. Plus, the gulab jamun was moldy. Moldy! Yuck.

Saturday I decided to follow through on my wish to try two restaurants I had seen featured on "You Gotta Eat Here", a Food Network show. I ordered a Pressed Cubano sandwich and fried plantain Tostonos from La Cubana on Gerrard to be picked up at 12:15. I walked out the door at 10 with a general map in my head to tour Leslieville and be at the restaurant on time to get my food.

At that time of morning the only lineups were for the bakeries, but the lineups were impressive. Covid restricted the number of people who could be inside but 5-10 people waited patiently outside each one I passed. I am not patient. I kept walking and as I turned up Broadview I saw a line but it was for fruit being sold out of a truck. There was a bakery next door and it was surprisingly quiet. The assumption I made very quickly was that this bakery probably has health violations pinned to the door or rats partying amongst the croissants, but I went in anyway. I took a chance on an chocolate orange scone, fully expecting few chips, and little hint of orange in a dry scone. I stepped out and in the 90 seconds I had been in there, 4 people had lined up. There is hope. And indeed, the scone was moist, bursting with orange flavour and plentiful chocolate chips.

I was still savouring my scone when I came upon a gaggle / troupe / herd of yoga-practicing-women. I sat on a bench, finishing my scone and watched. 20-30 people were on hands and knees releasing what required expelling through yoga. Something shook its long ears in the middle of the circle. Yes, one of the participant's pet rabbit lay in the middle of their circle, possibly wondering what manner of movement these creatures try every Saturday am. Flopsy seemed content to watch them stretch and strain. I suppose I could have joined them, and I'm sure I have a great many things needing expelling, but I know better. It hurts. Go at your own speed the instructor will say but when I see those limber contortions on my

left and those arcing unnaturally to my right, I get a touch competitive or embarrassed and push too hard. Then I find I can't tie my shoes for a week. But I was happy to watch others go through poses, now with hands cupped behind them, arched backward and gazing at the heavens as if looking for an answer of some kind. Wouldn't it be perfect if a plane trailing an ad for pizza flew by right then and half the group grabbed their funny packs and caught the next bus down to Sammi's. Timing is everything in advertising. In life.

My walk took me through a park along the DVP then up to Bloor. The full name of the DVP is the Don Valley Parkway, but saying the full name would give me away as someone who never really spent any time there, let alone growing up on its northwester outskirts. It would be just like those folks that pronounce the city To-ron-to so specifically, making sure every letter is given its proper recognition. As anyone from the region knows, there is but one T in Toronto, and the more casual pronunciations manage to rhyme it with "Hey Donna, still wanna? you said to ring you up when I was in Toronna". One of my favourite songs from high school.

I gazed across the bridge crossing the Don Valley (the highway, the river, the valley itself), the many barriers erected to keep people from jumping as had been a common problem a few decades ago, and decided I had the time to walk across and back and enjoy the view. It's no CN Tower but if heights aren't your thing, then it will give your knees a knock or two. Several places along the bridge the sidewalk is extended out over the modest abyss so you can see the view and also know how high above the DVP and Don River you are. I ventured a peek. I noticed that the river was flowing faster than the highway.

Back on the east side of the bridge I wandered along the Danforth (so that's where the Danforth Music Hall is...) catching snippets of conversations as I passed folks. Being alone I was more aware of the chatter around me, and was always interested by the subject matter. I heard the word vaccine several times as we neared the 50% fully vaccinated range in the province. I stopped in a specialty shop for socks and found socks printed with every imaginable hobby or career. And some that had f*** you printed all over them, which seemed out of place. Unless that's a hobby or career I haven't considered. Passing Broadview and Hogarth a number of fathers and their 11 or 12 year-old daughters were exiting cars with hockey sticks and helmets so I finally asked one what was happening. It was an outdoor ball hockey league one father told me, and the dads joined in. Nice.

I got to La Cubana on time and took my lunch back to the house. I couldn't remember if these were among the foods shown on the show but they were what sounded good to me and they were, delicious and unique.

With lots of daylight and energy left, I drove to my old home towns of Woodbridge and Kleinburg. Yes, I drove. It was a marathon weekend, not an ultramathon, or whatever a multi-marathon might be called.

I thought I would need signs announcing the towns to tell me where I was but despite so many changes over the almost 40 years since I moved away, there were lots of familiar sights. The old houses where I lived. The high school that revealed a few memories I wasn't expecting to have as I walked around the perimeter and felt the vibe of life from my teens, the size, the perspective, the sensation of the familiar doors and classroom windows. It was odd but happy. Woodbridge and it's significant Italian population was in full pre-game revelry for the Euro 2020 football final (delayed one year due to COVID) between England and Italy.

Once back at my sister's house I wandered down Queen Street to see if there was anything exciting happening, and I didn't have to go far. The Queen's Head Pub was hopping, not a table on the sidewalk available. Due to COVID, Toronto restaurants were given the sidewalk, sometimes even a lane of traffic, to set up tables and let people eat outside. Without a place to sit I leaned against a street sign and joined the throng watching the television. I arrived in time to see the last few minutes of Euro 2020 and with a tie, the match between England and Italy went to extra time and then penalty kicks. The crowd was a pretty even mix of the two places. I'm sure there are some readers who won't recall the outcome, or

haven't caught up on their PVR recordings yet, so to not spoil it, those readers should jump to the next paragraph. Let's just say the murmurs of "bloody hell" coincided with glasses of stouts and bitters being slammed on the table.

Friday and Saturday had been warm-ups to the longest day of the marathon weekend. It consisted of walking all around downtown including Chinatown and Koreatown (frequent snack stops, bubble tea and more), downtown Yonge Street (where I used to go record shopping at Sam's and A&As and Music World with buddies back in high school), Trinity-Bellwood (the advantage of walking through restaurant seating on the sidewalk was getting to see what everyone was eating!). I ate at another place featured on You Gotta Eat Here, Banh Mi Boys on Queen and Spadina and immediately decided they had somehow, recently taken a sample of my taste buds and prepared a banh mi and a steamed bao that lovingly hugged every single bud for the entire duration of my chewing experience. I'm not exaggerating, I wouldn't do that. It was that good.

As the countless kilometres clicked by, I only experienced two problems with the distance I had tackled. One was an irritated toenail. Before I left I worried about getting a blister, but this was a toenail that wanted me to know he was none too happy, and a week or so later he decided to take himself away from my middle toe altogether. As injuries go, it was a small marathon price to pay. But the other problem became increasingly urgent. COVID had restricted use of washrooms throughout the city. When I realized I was in need of a urinal I was too far from where I parked the car to get anywhere like the house, and I discovered all outdoor washrooms were locked. Restaurant washrooms were for customers only, and even then you might need a doctor's note to be given permission to go inside. As the blocks passed things were getting more urgent! I was eyeing the houses, tightly packed against one another with narrow spaces between each and his neighbour, and I wondered if anyone would see me in a laneway, having a quiet face-to-face with someone's outside wall. I really thought it was going to come to that. Fortunately I came across an alternative when I passed a school, which was closed for the summer of course. Whoever planted all of those big shrubs and bushes by the main door, I am forever grateful. I casually strolled to the doors with the air of a curious parent checking things out for my kid that fall, then when there was a lapse in traffic, I ducked into the privacy of the greenery. I reappeared a minute later with the same stealth and a relieved smile.

Despite my aching toe, I wandered back to the Queen's Head Pub that evening, thinking that this time I would get a table. It was full again!! English and Italian fans had been replaced by Brazilian and Argentinian for the final of the Copa America!! Is this a daily thing?!!

A single chair was available at one table on the sidewalk and a group of people nodded to me to take it. Again it seemed like a pretty even split of fans and several big screens gave everyone a good view of the game. The passion displayed was as intense as the night before, and this one ended 1-0 for Argentina. The adults supporting the winning side cheered and toasted for many minutes, and those for the losing side were good sports but quiet, while the kids in attendance from both sides immediately went back to their electronics and french fries. No lingering emotions from the kids.

The next morning I was heading back toward Ottawa on the all-too-familiar 401, my first Toronto Marathon under my belt (my weekend snacks hanging over it).
