1

The race against time

Sometimes I wonder what non-runners daydream about. For me, most reveries lead to running. I may not start there; I may not finish there. But there's usually a stage when I realise that, in my mind's eye, I've been running.

Even when the window through which I'm gazing belongs to an urban office, my notional self will skip unthinkingly over jostling traffic jams and pavements, escaping to unexplored parks, rivers and open spaces – irrespective of the fact that I'm principally thinking about something else. But I notice it most when I'm looking at the passing countryside from a car or train. No matter what else is in my head, something will grab my eye: an empty field; an inviting path; a soft green roll of rural landscape glimpsed through trees. And my drifting mind begins to sense the familiar rhythm, the patient reeling in of each slope and turn, the thrill of discovery as each new corner is turned or summit crested; the bright release of the downhill dash . . .

Then I remember that there is no actual runner doing this. And I wonder why not.

This happened recently when I spent an October night in Edale, en route to an engagement in Buxton. Edale is

a tiny Derbyshire village at the southern end of the Pennine Way, in the aptly named Hope Valley, shielded on all sides by the great green hills of the southern Peak District. Paths flow out from it in all directions: low routes and high routes, flat and steep; long, short, muddy, firm. There are deserted lanes, riverside footpaths, the wide, well-marked beginnings of the Pennine Way, and faint sheep-trods leading up to the open fells.

I'd been noticing them in the final miles of the journey up, and had had to make a conscious effort to focus on the road instead. No one with the slightest taste for running could come here and not feel their legs grow restless. If the sport leaves you cold, go to Edale and you'll understand.

Yet there weren't, as far as I could see, any runners. Where had they gone?

It was still light when I finished checking in at the bed and breakfast, so I decided that I, at least, would make the most of a place that seemed to have been created with runners' pleasure in mind. A path through a farmyard led me quickly to the Pennine Way.

It seemed as good a route as any: rich with the texture of an English autumn. I jogged gently, enjoying the feel of the ground as much as the surrounding views. The tensions of the long drive from Northamptonshire slipped away within minutes.

Detail after detail of the land around me snatched at my attention. One moment my eyes were feasting on the mesmerising complexity of the damp leaves, jagged and brilliant in the contrasts of their golden yellows and darkest browns, like smashed Marmite jars. Then I was on a sunken section of path – an ancient holloway, I thought, pressed into a trench by centuries of hooves – that filled my nostrils with the scent

of mud and leaf mould and my mind with long-lost memories of childhood conker gathering.

The bubbling of an adjoining stream dispelled these thoughts. How, I wondered, might that noise be replicated on a printed page? Shwshwshwshw? Gaaaaaaaaaaah? Blwblwblw? Each time I tried to spell it out, it sounded different.

Then – barely noticing that I was running – I was out in the gently sloping pastures beyond, where wide-eyed sheep gawped like bonneted extras in a costume drama, dumbstruck and woolly-headed. 'What are you looking at?' I snarled at one; then felt ashamed. There was really very little to be grumpy about.

I breathed in the delicious air, sweet with agricultural smells and touched with the moisture of the deepening evening. Its flavour could barely have changed in centuries. My mind wandered further, taking my feet with it. At one point I think I was running and daydreaming about running at the same time.

On the skyline to my right the higher slopes were lit up, golden from the shining sunset. One bare fell-top in particular – the nearest – seemed to have turned to molten metal: it glowed in the darkening sky like the flattened tip of a red-hot poker.

I left the Way and climbed towards it, following a thin half-path of flattened grass straight up the slope until I was breathless, drenched in sweat and striding out across the windy summit. I roamed where the land took me, haphazardly, relishing the feel of the soft, dry turf. I followed sheep-trods when I found them and my nose when I didn't, listening as the skylarks' songs came and went in the gusting wind and glancing only occasionally at the distinctive promontory to the north that I was using as a navigational reference point.

Worries about work, money and family were blown from my mind; for the first time in hours I wasn't subconsciously keeping track of what needed to be done next. Instead, I let myself be mesmerised by the lengthening shadows of the wind-swept grass and, increasingly, the lichen-coated stones strewn all around. What, I wondered, was each one's story? Some were clearly the remnants of walls, piled up by farmers within living memory. Others might well have been untouched since being thrown up by nature tens of thousands of years ago. And the rest? I had no idea, but did not let that stop me speculating about hill forts and battles, ancient Britons, Romans, Mercians and Danes, and any number of long-forgotten lives lived out against a backdrop scarcely distinguishable from what I saw around me. Did their ghosts ever wander on this hilltop? Were they mingling with these shadows now?

That's one of the things I love about running. It's the part of my life where I regularly jump on to trains of thought with no idea of where they're going – thinking, while running, about not running – and then find myself at unexpected destinations. By the time I remembered myself the sun had almost slipped below the opposite skyline. I hurried down the fellside, enjoying the perfect texture of the turf – dry enough to grip, soft enough to be painless – and feeling, for no earthly reason, rather pleased with myself.

Then, as I neared the bottom, I saw what looked like a ghost running towards me.

He was tall and haggard, dressed in a clumsy combination of singlet, long-sleeved top and baggy shorts, each in a slightly different shade of pale, washed-out yellow-gold. He may have been as young as thirty; if so, something about his expression or complexion seemed to reveal the future old man within. His sallow face seemed etched with shadows, like those on a

playing-card king. I suppose he was exhausted, but his grimace suggested horror rather than pain. Never, not even at a marathon finishing line, have I seen a runner whose gait was so overwhelmingly suggestive of suffering. He wasn't moving particularly fast and seemed to wince with each step. Yet he looked like a serious runner, not least because of the hydration pack he wore on his back, and because he kept looking anxiously at his watch.

By the time I had rejoined the Way he had gone, but I headed off in what I presumed were his footsteps, vaguely curious that someone could be running here, on an evening such as this, with so little apparent enjoyment. When I caught sight of him again, the setting sun had turned his flesh the same pale yellow-gold as his clothes – making me think, for some reason, of the little yellow man that Google uses as the guiding icon for its Street View service.

The path led quickly down into a quaint old stone farm, with a shaggy-hooved horse grazing in one field and black-legged chickens clucking to one another on the path. Did Street View's reach extend this far, I wondered? I hoped not, and resolved not to find out.

When I caught sight of him again he was leaning against a wooden signpost by the main farm gate, bent almost double. Was he being sick? Was he dying? Had he reached the end of his run? Or was he just having a rest?

I never found out. By the time I got there he was gone. I carried on up the next stage of the Pennine Way for a while, looking; but there was no sign of him. Then I ran back to the signpost. There was no corpse, and no vomit, so I assumed that he had gone in a different direction – unless he really was a ghost. But it was the signpost itself, by this stage, that fascinated me.

I had noticed it the first time I passed. Now I paused to study it properly: a white metal box fixed to the post at chest height, bright and hard against the soft, lichen-stained wood and the moss-carpeted drystone wall behind it. It was a bit bigger than a pack of cigarettes, with a hole in its front for inserting some kind of electronic device, together with a big red flame logo, a small Natural England acorn logo, and the word 'Trailblaze' in large type. There was also a short explanatory blurb ('A hand-picked portfolio of demanding endurance challenges, which runs through the world's most inspiring landscapes') and a web address at which to 'find out how you can take part'. Had this been what the ghostly runner had stopped here for? And, if so, what did it mean?

It was a small thing, and I resumed my run with no intention of giving it further thought. Yet somehow it preyed, intermittently, on my mind: then, later on, and for days afterwards – even after I had checked out the Trailblaze website and discovered what the little box really meant.

It wasn't the only thing that prompted this book. But it may have been the final catalyst that prompted me to begin it.

2

Big Running

In the dusty wastes of east London, a few hundred metres from the stadium where Mo Farah, Jessica Ennis and the rest performed their Olympic miracles at London 2012, Westfield shopping centre was a hive of activity. Eager shoppers buzzed in their thousands through the three floors of Europe's biggest shopping mall, visibly animated with anticipation, like fans arriving at a football match.

It would have been easy to miss Britain's biggest specialist running store among the brilliant shopfronts of more than 250 other retailers (including major Nike and Adidas outlets). But I knew that Sweatshop was there somewhere, and I needed – on strict instructions from my wife – to buy myself a birthday present. I hadn't spent a penny on my running habit for years, and I reckoned it couldn't take long to find something I needed.

I hadn't bargained for the Aladdin's Cave I eventually found, on the middle floor, tucked between Crocs and Lush. It seemed at first glance a modest place – compared with, say, the giant Ann Summers store opposite – but the understated shelves and rails within were loaded with small items of great value. It was a bit like entering a jeweller's shop.

Hundreds upon hundreds of pieces of shiny kit gleamed like Christmas tree baubles, each crying out to be touched and tested. I counted more than a hundred different kinds of running shoe on display, forty models of sports watch, nearly fifty different ways of getting hydration or nutrition on the move, thirty different types of headwear, fifty kinds of sock, and more shorts, singlets, jackets, tights, gilets, tops, T-shirts and thermals than I could even categorise, let alone count.

I didn't need any of them.

I wanted to buy them all.

A quick look at the price tags dispelled that notion. In fact, a sense that I was in danger of succumbing to ruinously expensive kit-lust made me feel suddenly uneasy about the whole idea of shopping here. Maybe I'd get myself a book instead. But, in the meantime, another idea had entered my head. What if I were a new runner: a young couch potato, inspired by the Olympics to try out running for the first time? What would it cost me to get myself kitted out, from scratch, assuming that all these products were as vital as the blurbs on their packaging suggested?

I began to fill an imaginary shopping basket with running basics: some trainers (Mizuno Wave Prophecy 2, £170); some shorts (Gore Men's X-Running 2.0, £60); a top (X-Bionic Powershirt, £70); some socks (X-Socks Effektor XBS Accumulator Competition Socks, £50); some gloves (Gore Mythos SO Running Gloves, £35); a windproof jacket (Nike Vapor Windrunner Men's Running Jacket, £150); some leggings (Nike Stretch Woven Men's Running Trousers, £40); a headband – don't ask me why, but there were thirty different kinds available (Nathan LED Headband, £30); a high-visibility bib (Sweatshop Hi Viz Run Bib, £6) and snapband (Ronhill Vizion, £5); some running sunglasses (Sunwise Waterloo GS,

£77.99); an armband for iPod or iPhone (iFitness Neoprene Armband, £20); some runners' headphones (Yurbuds Ironman Inspire, £60); some Brooks Race Day Arm Warmers – again, don't ask me why (£15); a combined sport watch, heart-rate monitor and GPS route-recorder (Garmin Forerunner 610, £279.99); a Mizuno Bottle Waist Pouch (£23); and a small selection from getting on for fifty different nutrition and hydration products: 500 grams of GO Electrolyte Sports Fuel (lemon and lime, £10.20), 1.6 kilograms of SIS Rego Rapid Recovery (strawberry, £31.80), three pouches of SIS Go Plus Carnitine Gel (lemon, £2 each) and three Lucozade Sport Carbohydrate Energy Gels (orange, £1.40 each).

My imaginary bill came to £1,144.18, and I hadn't even started on the various products relating to the treatment or management of injuries (including some seriously state-of-the-art 'compression pants' with built-in icepacks, from £80 to £100). I felt sick at the thought of it.

I was being profligate about price, of course. That's the joy of imaginary shopping. But even when I repeated the exercise selecting the very cheapest product in each category rather than the top of the range, I couldn't get the total below £494.16. Nor did I have any reason to suppose that Sweatshop charged more than its rivals. Later, I performed a similar experiment at upandrunning.co.uk and spent – notionally – £1,348.45 (although that did include an extra £29.99 for a Power Balance silicone wristband and £6 for a jar of Halo Proactive Sports Wash – 'the World's first Non Bio Laundry Detergent designed specifically for Sports wear clothing').

The worrying thing was that it took a real effort to walk out of Sweatshop without buying anything. Never mind the price tags; never mind the fact that I'd been running happily for decades without this stuff; never mind the fact that the

credit card in my pocket was throbbing from imaginary overuse. I felt incomplete without these tantalisingly pristine products, whose blurbs made them sound so indispensable ('to improve your performance like nothing before…'; 'you'll notice improved core body control and power, as well as less post-exercise muscle soreness…'; 'power-mesh contrast panels for breathability and ventilation…'; 'the world's most complete training watch ever… enabling you to re-live, track and learn from every session to constantly improve your performance'). I was still feeling pangs of desire – a physical ache deep inside me – when I drove away afterwards.

I glanced back wistfully and caught a glimpse of the mall and the stadium facing one another: two vast and windowless structures – a Large Hadron Collider and a giant brown box – towering above Stratford's wide concrete spaces, like secular cathedrals: twin monuments to the dreams of twenty-first-century Britain. Winning and shopping: what more does one need?

A bit later, I thought: this is insane. Times are hard. All but a handful of us are tightening our belts. We've less in our take-home pay (if we're lucky enough still to have any), less in the bank and less reason to feel secure about the future. Yet we're spending more than ever before on running.

The details are breathtaking. Running, as an industry, is barely less significant in British life than farming. Look around you, anywhere, and you'll see its products: running shoes, running clothes, running books, running DVDs, special running equipment (from heart-rate monitors to treadmills), special running drinks and foods, running shops, glossy running magazines, advertisements in the glossy magazines for every conceivable running-related product. Estimates and definitions vary, but a low-end estimate, from the consultants

NPD Inc., puts the 2012 value of the UK running market at retail alone at £425 million. That's just the stuff you see in shops. There's also a vast running economy beyond the high street. Think of the bright young things, hundreds of them, who work for bodies such as Sport England, or who spent years working for the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG). Think of the gym workers and personal trainers; the go-getters who organise for-profit races; the people who sell race T-shirts and race goodie bags; the people who put on running festivals and running holidays; the therapists who treat running-related injuries; the sponsorship brokers; the corporate ladder-climbers at the running shoe multinationals.

It's hard to put precise figures on it: how many of the 26,000 people who work in the British gym industry, for instance, should be counted as part of the running economy? But it's clear that, even without the competitive elite (and their coaches, managers, sponsors and agents), it all adds up to a big, big business. Globally, according to a 2013 report by Bloomberg, the running industry is worth nearly twice as much as the football industry: NPD Inc. values the retail part of it at £16.5 billion a year, including £5.5 billion spent on 'running shoes used for running' (just over half of the overall running shoe market). In England alone, 441,000 people work in sport-related jobs – twice as many as work in agriculture, forestry and fishing combined. Even if only 33,000 of these jobs are categorised as running-related (a back-of-an-envelope extrapolation based on running's 7.5 per cent share of the UK's £5.7 billion sports retail market), that's significantly more people than, say, the Church of England employs. And the numbers are getting bigger. In the past twenty years the running market has grown by 500 per cent.

And the insanity? It comes down to one question: how can running be an industry at all? Can you think of any other human activity, apart from eating, drinking, sex and defecating, that is so utterly natural as running? It's as simple, spontaneous and life-enhancing as singing. We've been doing it for tens of thousands of years: for necessity (hunting, fleeing, etc.) and, over countless generations, for pleasure. A child doesn't need special training or equipment to discover the joy of running for fun, any more than a dog or a horse does. There's no more need for a running industry than there is for a tree-climbing industry or a hide-and-seek industry.

Except, of course, that that's not how the modern world works. The opposing forces of capitalist consumerism and the socialist-inspired nanny state have between them squeezed all but a few drops of spontaneity from our lives. (Come to think of it, they turned eating, drinking and sex into industries long ago. Watch out for Big Defecation.) It may seem perverse, in these economically stagnant times, to moan about the fact that one of our industries, based on popular enthusiasm for a life-enhancing activity, is booming. But every boom comes at a price, and in this case – I'd argue – the price is paid by ordinary consumers, impoverished by the relentless pressure to buy more or better kit or, alternatively, marginalised, excluded or deterred because they can't afford it.

This isn't just a running issue; it's true of many of life's basic pleasures. It's still theoretically possible to enjoy them without spending a fortune on equipment, ingredients, packaging and extras, but the twenty-first century's agencies of persuasion encourage us to consider it weird to do so. Indeed, that may, sadly, turn out to have been the most enduring legacy of London 2012. Long after the athletes and volunteers and others who created the magic had gone home, the

sponsors were still booming out the same deafening message from the billboards: if you want to amount to anything in your chosen sport – or, by implication, in life generally – then, obviously, you'll need to buy the same state-of-the-art clothing, equipment, nutritional aid, shampoo or even junk food that your particular Olympic hero or heroine has been paid to endorse. One year on from the Games, grassroots participation in sport had fallen, by 100,000 a week. But television viewing figures were at an all-time high, while a sponsor such as Procter & Gamble (makers of the Olay products endorsed by Jessica Ennis and Victoria Pendleton) was on target to record £325 million of extra sales. So no one can say that a generation wasn't inspired.

And while the Olympic fortunes of our elite athletes are as likely to go down as up at future Games, you can be pretty certain that, for expenditure on grassroots running, the trend can only be upward. Renaud Vaschalde, sales and sport industry analyst at the aforementioned NPD Inc., forecasts that the market will continue to grow by 6 per cent or more per year until at least 2016. 'Running is definitely the fastest growing sport at global level,' he adds.

Within a year or two, those products in my imaginary Sweatshop shopping basket will have been superseded by new ones: more sophisticated, more expensive, more achingly essential. Never mind if we can afford them or not. Running is now a market, not a recreation: buying products is what ordinary runners are supposed to do. If you're not a consumer, you're at best ridiculous, at worst weird.

A similar kind of twisted logic has persuaded any number of modern children that, for example, a packaged sandwich is more desirable than a homemade one; or that clothing with logos is better than clothing without. It is, I suppose, a rational

response to a lifetime of being carpet-bombed by advertising. The bought things in life are better – more desirable, more trustworthy, perhaps even more real – than those that you simply improvise for yourself.

So it is that – to return to the point where the previous chapter left off – by 2013 there were two very different ways for a runner to enjoy a rural trail such as the Pennine Way. You could go to the trail and start running. Or you could go to the Trailblaze website, set up an account there (£20 a year at the time of my visit), get a digital toggle, insert it into every Trailblaze box you passed on any one of a dozen of England's best-known scenic trails (as my 'ghost' was presumably doing) and, in return, have your trail-running achievements recorded and published online and, if you ran far enough, rewarded with various coloured wristbands.

Does either of these approaches strike you as ridiculous? And, if so, which one?

In fact, by the time you read this, the Trailblaze 'project' will have been discontinued. Concerted opposition by an alliance of rural traditionalists has caused a drying-up of the enterprise's public funding – of which there was at one point a surprising amount (from, among others, the EU, Defra, the South West Regional Development Agency and the South Devon AONB Sustainable Development Fund). A knock-on effect on profits was unavoidable, and the people behind it, a Devon-based outfit called Endurancelife, pulled the plug on it. None the less, it's striking that, between 2011 and 2013, hundreds of people found the Trailblaze concept sufficiently convincing to buy into it. Many went further and shelled out extra cash for bronze membership: £61 a year, including membership card, stickers, visor and branded arm warmers. Presumably they felt that they got enough out of the

transaction for it to be worthwhile; and it is not for me to question their judgement.

Yet I can't help feeling a lingering distaste for the enterprise: not because of its alleged desecration of the countryside (in fact, you could barely notice it), but because the core idea was so perverse. Why pay to run when you can run for free? Why brand something when it is part of our common heritage?

Rightly or wrongly, the short-lived concept of Trailblaze has come to symbolise, for me, a wider and more fundamental surrender to consumerism in twenty-first-century Britain. More people than ever before are struggling to make ends meet and yet we seem to have lost the will to question or resist the propaganda of big business. Advertisers target us virtually every minute of our waking lives, online and off, and sometimes it seems as though just being a person is no longer enough. Instead, for your life to be worth anything, you have to be a consumer, defined by the objects you covet or spend your money on. It is, similarly, no longer enough simply to do something. For an activity to count, money and products must change hands; ideally, the transaction must be 'shared' online.

As a runner, I notice this trend particularly in running. A pleasure that ought to be gloriously simple has been made prohibitively complicated and expensive: not by law but by a kind of unthinking consensus. 'Go outside, put one foot in front of the other, continue until you've had enough' has become 'Spend several weeks' wages on state-of-the-art shoes and purpose-made clothing; consume large quantities of specialist high-energy food and drink from brightly coloured pouches; buy hi-tech equipment to measure time, speed, distance, strides, heart rate, weight loss and more; subscribe to every possible running magazine and website; buy any new

products you see advertised there; perform complex warm-up routines, preferably tailor-made for you by a professional "expert"; use a specialist app to determine optimum route; measure performance against norms for your age, gender, weight, etc.; calculate your body mass index, body fat percentage, power-to-weight ratio, etc., to several decimal points; download as many as you can afford from a choice of several hundred running and fitness apps; keep a digital log, preferably online, of every run you do (if not via Trailblaze then via Garmin – makers of the £279.99 training watch mentioned earlier and, it seems, a market leader in this fast-expanding field); monitor (and share) your calorie expenditure, steps taken, achievement levels and much else with a £129 Nike+ FuelBand or similar; seek specialist medical treatment for repetitive strain injuries that your state-of-the-art running shoes have mysteriously failed to prevent; buy even more expensive, more state-of-the-art running shoes to reduce (supposedly) the risk of injury recurrence . . . and so on until you can no longer afford to continue.'

The strange thing is, the more we spend on running, as a nation, the less fit and more fat we collectively become. In the past twenty years (when, remember, expenditure on running has increased fivefold), the incidence of obesity in the UK has doubled.

Or perhaps it isn't so strange. If even the simplest kind of outdoor exercise has been converted into a form of consumption, is it really surprising if those without money to burn opt to remain on the sofa? On the contrary: being a couch potato is the logical response.

'They took all the trees,' sang Joni Mitchell, 'and put 'em in a tree museum,/ And charged the people a dollar-and-a-half just to see 'em.' It's much the same with running, except

that it will cost you a lot more than a dollar-and-a-half to get yourself kitted out as a proper modern runner; and more still to start running in the way that politicians and health professionals generally recommend – that is, on a treadmill in a members-only gym.

Runners are born free, and everywhere they run in chains. Or, if you prefer, in chain stores. This book is written in the hope of helping at least some of those runners to liberate themselves.

It is, among other things, a manifesto for a different kind of running: a de-commercialised, lo-tech kind of running, accessible to all. I hesitate to call it a new kind of running, because most previous generations will have run in the ways and settings that I describe. But it is 'new' in the sense that many of us may need to relearn it, in the same way that a calculator user might need to relearn mental arithmetic or a satnav user might need to relearn to read a map – and in the same way that millions of us might one day need to learn the basic cooking and making-and-mending skills that our grandparents took for granted. You could even think of this book as a manual: a 'how to' guide for those for whom the tried and tested ways of the past represent scarily unfamiliar territory.

It is about the kind of running that involves getting wet, and muddy, and lost; the kind of running where you'll be more concerned with the rhythms of the agricultural year and the ways of wild and domesticated animals than you will be with split times and recovery rates. You won't need a stopwatch for it, or a heart-rate monitor, or any other special equipment (or, for that matter, skills): just a sense of wonder and a resolution to live in the moment.

I've no more claim to proper expertise in athletic matters than I have to be a doctor or an accountant. Yet there is one

subject in which I consider myself reasonably knowledgeable: namely, the art of incorporating a running habit into a normal modern lifestyle – busy, stressed, time-poor – in such a way that it never becomes an unsustainable chore.

In more than thirty years of amateur running I've approached the sport from many angles: competitive, recreational, hi-tech, lo-tech, consumerist and natural. I've run on roads, pavements, parks, treadmills, footpaths, fields, moors, mountains, beaches, stairwells, escalators – even, occasionally, running tracks. I have no special talents as a runner but might at different times have reasonably been described as keen, half-hearted, obsessive, a kit junkie, a nutter, quite good, pretty pathetic, middle-of-the-pack and plain useless.

But I've never stopped enjoying it, or doing it.

'Gosh, you must have a lot of willpower,' people often say when they hear that I still go running every day at the age of fifty-three. To which I reply: bollocks. I exercise no more willpower in going running than I would in eating a bar of chocolate. I don't do it for self-improvement, or to keep me slim or healthy. I do it for pleasure. It's my little treat. Or, rather, my big treat: a seemingly inexhaustible stream of free, life-affirming brightness from which I constantly refresh myself, spiritually and physically.

The aim of this book is to share this indulgence with other people; to help any runner whose running habit has become a dutiful, expensive routine to convert it into a sustainable, affordable pleasure. It's partly a manual, partly a description of a typical year in the life of a rural runner, and partly an account of a journey: my own long, unexpectedly liberating journey through a succession of different approaches to running.

If I sometimes come across as being critical of other, non-rural forms of running, remember: the person I'm

criticising is me. Road-running, gyms, obsessively competitive running – I have devoted years of my life to each and have no wish to attack such approaches. We all run in the ways that seem most appropriate to us, at different stages of our lives. I'm merely suggesting – and celebrating – an additional, neglected kind of running: not an 'instead' but an 'as well'.

And if I sometimes get carried away with enthusiasm as I try to share an aspect of my life that has brought me huge amounts of joy, please don't mistake my enthusiasm for self-congratulation. In many cases, I'm only just discovering those joys myself.

3

Clock-watching

Is it only me who sees his life melting away behind him: thousands of packed, unique, exuberant days merging into pale decades that dissolve in turn into a tired, misremembered fog? Or is that just what middle age feels like?

I can't be the only modern fifty-three-year-old to look back on the prime of his life and think: did I really need to spend quite so much time at work? Did I really need to meet all those targets? To earn so much? To spend so much? To waste so little time?

I can't be the only one to think: is that it?

But I may be the only one to blame it on running.

It's a long story. Let's begin it, more than three decades ago, with a feckless young man in south London, drifting through life and work in a post-teenage daydream, who decided, belatedly, that it was time to get a grip. The dissolute lifestyle of a would-be journalist has much to be said for it, unless you try to combine it with the pitiful income and career prospects of a permanently hungover office junior. By the time I realised that my way of living was unsustainable, I could barely see my way out of it.

Then, one summer evening, hungry, hungover,

frustrated, down to my last cigarette, too penniless to go out but too bored to stay in, I remembered an article I'd been proof-reading about the psychological benefits of exercise and, in desperation, decided to go for a run.

I dug out my old gym shoes, borrowed a pair of shorts, slipped out of the overcrowded house I was sharing and, for a strange half-hour, puffed, spluttered and shuffled my way to the local common and back again.

Millions of other runners will have had comparable experiences. We all come to it in different ways, but there is still usually an 'it': the equivalent of a smoker's first cigarette. It's not necessarily the very first: it's the first that leads to another, and then to another.

The thing itself is usually forgettable. All I remember of mine – the run, not the cigarette – is the coughing, and the sense that my chest was about to split open, and the shocking redness of my face when I noticed my reflection in a window. Actually, my first cigarette was much the same. But with that first run – a decade later, on a busy Clapham Common rather than in the woods behind the school gym – there was also the unaccustomed peace and depth of the night's sleep that followed, and the disorienting sense of self-worth the next day.

It takes more than one fix to establish a habit; sometimes, a degree of willpower is required. But once it's part of your life you can look back to that very first time as a landmark: the watershed between (in this example) life as a non-runner and life as a runner. Years later, we can look back and say: that was the night (or day) when I started to become who I am.

It took a few months to catch on, for me. But it did, and within a year I had recognised it as a life-changing liberation. I had stumbled upon a way of letting off steam that got me into neither trouble nor debt.

Within three or four years I had grown used to it – and was acquiring a more or less lasting sense that I was not quite as helpless in the face of life's turbulence as I had imagined. I can't pretend that my life was never again a mess: one burst of super-intense strength training, a year or so into this phase, was inspired by a threatened visit by some angry sounding debt collectors. But it was never again an entirely helpless mess. As I discovered myself as a runner – and learnt to ignore the inner voice that continued for years to whinge about not really feeling like it today and couldn't we do it tomorrow instead? – so I acquired an increasingly firm faith that I had it within me, through self-discipline and perseverance, to make more of a difference – to my own life and to others' – than my old, hopeless, apathetic self had ever believed possible.

Some people tag their memories with pop music. Call up the right song, and great handfuls of the past – friends, places, holidays, jobs, parties, kisses, homes, dreams – will surface with it. Runners, if they choose, can do much the same with runs. If I want to retrieve the texture of a period in my life, I think back to where and how I would have been doing most of my running at the time. Then I focus on the details of the route and wait for the past to resurface.

If it is slow to do so, I try to think my way through the relevant route in more detail, step by step: where I would have started; what time of day it would have been; who, if anyone, would have run with me; what sights, sounds and smells I would have encountered at different stages on the route; what my likely frame of mind would have been.

With sufficient focus and persistence, every stride of the route returns, vividly, in real time, each step leading logically to the next. By the time my mental run is over I will sometimes feel so in touch with the person I was then that I have

almost become him: as if I were about to wake up from a strange dream about the future and re-enter the world that I lived in then.

Here I am, for example, on one of those Friday evenings when, having seen off the almost irresistible temptation to blow my week's wages on beer and bad behaviour, I would work off the resulting frustration with a long, slow run, just keeping on going, sometimes for hours, until I felt happy again. On a good night I could make it from south London to the Thames and beyond, into the royal parks, as I worked my way through my various resentments and worries.

Sometimes I would meander through the almost-empty parks until late at night, marvelling at my good fortune at having all this expensively landscaped space more or less to myself. And once, at least, a dark summer evening grew suddenly sweet with the scent of a rose garden, presumably from behind some palace walls, and I laughed out loud at the thought that I was getting more pleasure from those flowers than the people for whom they were planted.

Naturally, as I meandered, my troubles would drift away, one by one, and my mind would fill instead with thoughts from books and films, with jokes and sports highlights and dreamy plans for love, work and adventure – with, in short, all the nonsense with which youths everywhere have always filled their heads.

If I'd passed you, you'd probably have avoided my glance. I was shabby, crop-haired, muscular, with none of the shiny kit that might have denoted a respectable, competitive athlete; you might even have scrutinised me to check that I wasn't running away with someone's handbag. Inside, however, I was just an ordinary young man: clumsy, well-meaning, vulnerable; searching for certainty and confidence; flitting from pose to

pose; an insecure blunderer whose hard-boned head was full of poetry and yearning. Like many runners, this tortured-looking individual was striving for something that could be encapsulated by the phrase 'personal best'. In his case, however, the words had nothing to do with time, speed or distance. Rather, he was trying – with a certain feeble heroism – to realise, for once in his life, something of his personal potential.

It frightens me that I could have forgotten someone who was once so real. Yet retracing my regular running routes brings it all back, so vividly that I feel that I could stretch out and touch myself. (And, indeed, I long to do so. I want to reach back through time and tell him: 'Don't worry. It will be all right. Every step you take is a step in the right direction.')

Such memories present themselves as single episodes: individual runs with a beginning, a middle and an end. They're kidding me. They feel authentic but these visions are in reality misleading tapestries, woven from countless different occasions into a self-serving whole. Examine their internal logic and they fall apart like dreams. Yet they're no less intoxicating – to me – for that.

Here I am again, for example, in another retracing of the same block of memory, running north from the Oval, up the long plane-lined avenue of Kennington Road, up through Lambeth, working up a rhythm and a sweat. By the time I have reached the parks of central London I have shaken off the day's rage and frustration at my boring, ill-paid job as (by now) a junior magazine sub-editor. Yet the chronology doesn't add up. In between those two moments, as I cross Westminster Bridge on that same nostalgically retrieved run, it is early morning, with the air fresh and the Thames sparkling peacefully beneath me in the dawn's first warmth and the streets barely awake and (as William Wordsworth observed two

centuries earlier) all London's mighty heart lying still.

In my remembered run, I am always alone at that point – although in reality I don't think I ever ran in the early morning in those days unless I was dragged out by one or more housemates. Conversely, there are usually two or three of us by the time I recross southwards at Lambeth Bridge. The warm breeze that drifts up to us from the broad river is less bitter than the air we have been breathing on the city streets, and a few gulps of it are usually the perfect incentive to kick on for the final couple of miles. It is still light at that point – it feels like a late Sunday afternoon – with a rose-tinted sun sinking into the ripples to the west; yet by the time we emerge from the railway arches on Lambeth Road – a few hundred metres later – the remembered scene is as dark and deserted as midnight, with the scent of the next morning's bread wafting from the Lambeth Walk baker's.

And then there's the mile-long dash for home, and once again I'm alone, watching for Sunday afternoon traffic out of the corners of my eyes as I cross half a dozen side roads without breaking my stride, insulating myself from the pain of the final sprint by reciting poetry to myself. (I had taken to heart the teachings of Percy Cerutty, the great Australian coach-philosopher of the 1950s whose training methods placed almost as much emphasis on spiritual conditioning as on physical.)

You get the picture. If you've done any kind of running you can probably conjure up an equivalent of your own that is as poignantly evocative for you as mine is for me.

The point is not the details of the scenery but the person running through it. The former are just a means of evoking the latter. And the purpose of evoking the latter is not (in this context) the alarming thrill of remembering the people

we once were but, more modestly, the insight that comes from remembering the kind of runners we once were.

Suppose – and I'm only guessing here – that there are Seven Ages of Running. What might they be? The First is presumably the total novice: hesitant, embarrassed, still only provisionally committed, and pleasantly surprised on first completing a distance that can be measured in miles rather than metres. (As with the first of Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man, a certain amount of 'mewling and puking' is sometimes involved, too.) That would be me on Clapham Common.

The runner of the Second Age is more of a zealot. Going for a run no longer feels like a mad experiment. You know you can do it. You know you feel better when you do it. You know that, the more you do it, the better you get at it. So the challenge and the excitement relate mainly to the simple life discipline of doing it more.

Somehow you have to carve out spaces from your life for running where no such spaces existed before. Other routines have to give. Pubs? Television watching? Work? Meals? The friends who bring out the worst in you? Different lives have different default modes, good and bad. In the Second Age of Running, the thing that absorbs and excites you is changing the default: resetting your life to accommodate your new habit. Many of us find ourselves feeling dramatically better about life as we do so – which explains why so many of us, in this phase, are inclined to bore our friends with our excitement, like new parents who prattle as though no one had ever had a baby before. Those scenes in the parks and bridges of central London were from my Second Age of Running.

Let's rejoin my younger self, a year or two later. I'm living in a different part of south London now, in Camberwell, cohabiting with Clare, my future wife. The daily run has

become as instinctive as brushing my teeth. It still makes me happy – or, at least, it makes me unhappy if I don't do it. But it no longer fills me with wonder.

I normally go in the evening, first thing after getting back from work. That way there's still some evening left afterwards. There's less romance to the running by now. Get changed, jog up and down the street a couple of times, stretch a bit, then off, fast, pushing myself from the first stride. If there's a friend around who wants to come with me, well and good; if not, I'm not going to waste time trying to rustle someone up.

I'm usually able to sustain the fierce rhythm for the whole run – typically five or six miles – but I have to concentrate. So there's less room in my head for idle dreams. If my mind does wander, it does so across a range of concerns that are increasingly grown-up: work, wedding plans, the pros and cons of house-buying – that sort of thing.

The various routes I used to take in this period are oddly lacking in detail when I try to re-run them in my head. Narrow pavements. Busy roads. Some ups and downs along Herne Hill Road and Red Post Hill. A vague sense of relief on reaching Dulwich and, eventually, Dulwich Park. And then, with a few variations, the whole thing in reverse.

The thing that comes back with most clarity is the sense of how much faster I was getting – and of how absorbing I found this. Each evening, as I started, I would check my watch. It was a pre-digital model, one with hands, so I could time myself only by memorising the exact time that I started. Oddly, I never once forgot it. I knew the records for all my principal routes; and I was more likely to break a record than to be significantly outside it.

When I visualise myself pounding through Dulwich Park, the main sense impressions that return are of the pounding

rather than the park. The latter comes back to me as a vague blur of grass and trees; but I can remember vividly the feeling of pressing, relentlessly, against my limitations, always pushing myself forwards, straining against some invisible force of resistance at the front of my chest. The fitter I got, the further I could push it back. But it was always there; and I never eased off from pushing.

If there was any poetry in my soul as I ran, it, too, was running-specific. Where once I had merely daydreamed as I ran, I now enriched my routine with visualisations of track heroes: of the perfect symmetry of Coe, the implacable rhythm of Cram, the weightless elasticity of Aouita. Where once I had fantasised about being a better person, I was now concerned mainly with being a better athlete. Focus was the key. Exclude all other thoughts, concentrate only on that perfect rhythm, that perfect balance, with every stride; let rhythm and balance and suppleness fill every corner of your soul – and before you know it they will fill your running, too.

Such living in the moment has much in common with some forms of meditation, and I suspect has similar psychological benefits. Yet I don't look back to these runs with as much affection as I do to earlier or later phases in my running evolution. All that focus could too easily turn into a form of joylessness. Road crossings, for example – jogging on the spot waiting for a gap in the traffic – were no longer a welcome break but an irritation. I found myself choosing routes less for their interest than for the amount of uninterrupted full-speed running they offered. Increasingly, I preferred half a dozen quality circuits of Ruskin Park to a more discursive journey through south London on which I might have to slow down or stop from time to time.

There weren't any iPods then, but if someone had offered

me an easy way of delivering rhythmic music to my ears while I ran I would certainly have taken it. Anything that helped me to eliminate distractions and focus on the job in hand was welcome.

I suspect it's no coincidence that I was, by now, finally starting to get somewhere in my career. Nothing spectacular, sadly, but employers were beginning to recognise and value my ability to focus, to set and meet targets, to make adequate preparations, to be honest about progress, to stay the course, to push myself – all qualities that flowed from my running.

At some point in this period I moved to a job where there was an office gym – offering the even more focused option of doing all my runs at a constant, measurable pace on an indoor treadmill. The only thing that stopped me from doing so was the fact that (in those days) the treadmill didn't go fast enough for someone with aspirations to being a proper middle-distance runner.

I also trained regularly on a public running track – with friends, on Sunday afternoons – where, again, the act of running could be distilled to its purest form, without distractions. Occasionally, I raced: not on tracks but on roads, at distances from 2.5 miles to half-marathon. I didn't win anything, but I was often near the front; and the harder I trained, the better I performed.

Seasoned runners will recognise the gist, if not my specific combination of details. This is the Third Age of Running, when a general desire for self-improvement gives way to a yearning for 'peak performance'. You're already relatively near your natural peak, and your times no longer improve in huge leaps and bounds as you shed the accumulated unfitness of the years; instead, you forage through the collective know-how of the running world in search of tips, tricks, techniques and

technology that might help you achieve what Team GB coaches call 'marginal gains'. You might be well below Team GB standard – I certainly was – but the principles are the same: half a per cent here, a tenth of a per cent there, and it all adds up.

The other thing that distinguishes this Third Age runner from the previous two is the kit. In my case, the frayed Green Flash gym shoes had by now been replaced by an expensive pair of Asics, identified for me by a biomechanics expert at a specialist running shop as the model most appropriate for my (pronating) running style. My heavy, sweat-drenched T-shirts had given way to bright, lightweight, synthetic vests; my stiff cotton rugby shorts to purpose-made Lycra running shorts; and so on.

Actually, it's hard to think of much else that a runner in London could need, except possibly socks. None the less, I found ways to fill up our home with lots of it: windproof and waterproof outerwear, gloves, sweatbands, water bottles, spare clothes, spare shoes, and, yes, special runners' socks. There were also running magazines, fitness magazines, even a sports science book or two. Anything that could conceivably narrow the gap between me and my Olympic heroes was irresistible to me. And, for that brief window of affluence when Clare and I had two good incomes and no children, the cost seemed tolerable. If I didn't buy a heart-rate monitor or a back-mounted hydration pack, that was only because they weren't yet available. The running industry must have loved me. Big Running loves Third Age runners.

And the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Ages of Running? The sad truth is, most of us never get that far.