‘Heartfelt and passionate, this book will inspire you to fight for your right to tread your own path’
CAROLINE CRIADO PEREZ , author of *Invisible Women*

RACHEL HEWITT

In Her Nature

How Women Break Boundaries in the Great Outdoors

In Her Nature

Also by Rachel Hewitt

A Revolution of Feeling

Map of a Nation

In Her Nature

How Women Break Boundaries in the Great Outdoors

RACHEL HEWITT

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In memory of:

Josie Camus

Nick Hewitt

Bethany Jane Skinner

Willy Brown

Ian Newbon

Pete Newbon

And for my girls, Molly, Martha and Esme

Contents

Introduction

In April 2018, I visit a running shop to buy a new pair of shoes. The store's three walls are covered in shelves displaying brightly coloured trainers – road-running trainers with soles built from hollow pods that compress as they strike the ground and bounce back propulsively; narrow, fell-running shoes with sharp toothy 'lugs' across the bottom to cling to mud and peat. There are ultra-running shoes with thick, mattressed soles to cushion the feet after 50, 100, even 200 miles; and plimsoles with spikes protruding from the front, to grip the rubber of athletics tracks. There are shoes for pretty much every distance and every type of ground cover. But they are almost all for men. The shop has only four types of running shoe made specifically for women.

Women's bodies need different shoes from men. Because of our wider hips, women have a larger 'Q angle' – the angle between a vertical line running through the kneecap and a diagonal line tracking from the kneecap to the hip – meaning that female runners are more likely to run 'knock-kneed'. So shoes designed specifically for women are often shaped to encourage the foot and knee outwards, to mitigate this tendency. The proportions of women's feet are also different to men's: wider at the forefoot and narrower at the heel, meaning that when women wear men's running shoes, we often find them too tight at the front and too loose at the back. And women are, on average, lighter than men, so the cushioning on men's running shoes may not properly compress and spring back under a female runner's weight.

I ask the shop assistant why they stock so few shoes for women.

'It's the numbers,' he replies, flicking a wing of hair off his forehead. 'Men have been running since, like, ancient Greece. But women only started around 1975. There are lots of women running now but

it's a really recent thing. So kit designers are playing catch-up. Whereas they've been designing for men for hundreds of years.'

Hmm, sounds plausible. I nod, smile, pay for a pair of trainers and leave.

A few weeks later, while I'm out running, I think about the shop assistant's claim that 'women only started running around 1975'. Even if he was referring only to running as a sport or weekend pursuit, this surely can't be true? Running, in its most basic form, is a pretty natural human activity. Young children have to be socialised *not* to run and are taught to walk instead, along school corridors and busy pavements.

I decide to look deeper into the notion that women have only really taken to running since the mid 1970s, for roughly as long as I have been alive. But women don't feature much in bestselling books about running. Covers overwhelmingly bear silhouettes of sleek and honed men's physiques, posed in the muscular right-angles of running 'flight', and women are often invisible inside these books too. One writer claims that 'the body-fat ratio' of the 'average fit person' is 15 per cent. But he means the average *male* 'fit person'. The average fit woman's body fat percentage is 21–4 per cent.[1]

In one memoir I read about female runners through a heterosexual man's eyes – as 'pretty girls' whom it's 'pretty wonderful to watch' – but there is nothing about women's own achievements or what running means to us. Another book claims to explore 'how running makes us human', but when the author lists all the reasons that people run, he doesn't mention motivations that I recognise – such as needing to find myself again after having children – and I suspect that many of these writers are really interested in 'how running makes us men'.[2]

Women are not entirely absent from the sports shelves of bookshops. Recently books about 'running like a girl' have been written by authors such as Bella Mackie, Anna McNuff, Alexandra Heminsley and Rosie Swale Pope. But women's writings aren't always given equal credence or visibility. 'Look at any list of the greatest sports books of all time and you will struggle to find a female protagonist

represented,' writes Emma John in an article that demands: 'Where are all the great books about women in sport?' Mixed-sex anthologies about sport, the outdoors and the natural world are routinely male-dominated. Even *Granta* magazine's landmark 'New Nature Writing' volume included only two women to seventeen men (despite the (male) editor's pledge that he wanted it to offer an alternative to the 'conventional nature writer' who is 'a certain kind of man, and it would always be a man: bearded, badly dressed, ascetic, misanthropic'). And this male bias continues across other forms of publications, including websites and blogs. One site I encounter makes a similar claim to the man in the shop and tells me that 'women didn't run before 1974'.[3]

I widen my search and start looking for women in the outdoors more generally – female hikers, mountaineers, rock climbers. There seems to be a benchmark here too for when women first entered outdoor sport. A blog post suggests that women's long-distance walking started in 1955, when Emma Gatewood became the first woman to hike the entire Appalachian Trail. One scholar reports that 'few women were . . . climbing' mountains in the nineteenth century and another claims that 'women's historic role [in sport] was that of handkerchief-fluttering spectators'.[4] It is even harder to find any mention of either early BAME sportswomen, women athletes with disabilities, and/or those from working-class backgrounds. After a number of Google searches, I read about Sophia Danenberg, the first Black woman to climb Everest (in 2006); Bachendri Pal, the first Indian woman to climb Everest (in 1984); and Junko Tabei from Japan, who became the first woman to reach the summit of Everest (in 1975). But I cannot easily find available information about any BAME female climbers before the 1970s. Blogs and articles about the history of disability in sport rarely cover a time before archer Neroli Fairhall became the first paraplegic competitor in the (1984) Olympic Games.

This initial research leaves me with the impression that, before the 1970s, women were basically absent from the sporting world. Perhaps the man in the running shop was right after all?

Then, while I'm continuing to look online, I come across a collection of digitised photographs, taken in the 1880s and 1890s, by the glamorously named Lizzie Le Blond.

I discover that Lizzie – born Elizabeth Hawkins-Whitshed – was a highly respected 'lady mountaineer', who recorded the challenges she set herself in thousands of photographs of the mountains, valleys and lakes in the Upper Engadin region of the Swiss Alps. Her photographs are not just of solitary mountain scenes: she also captured the people with whom she climbed, hiked, skated, tobogganed, played tennis and bicycled. Everywhere in her photographs there are women. Le Blond photographed sportswomen racing skeleton sledges down the notoriously fast Cresta Run and through the snowed-in streets of St Moritz. She photographed female athletes cycling across Switzerland, Italy and France. She photographed women figure-skating, curling, playing 'bandy'; women competing in singles and doubles tennis matches. Women roped together, peering down crevasses and scrambling up ridges and hiking through forest trails. And she wrote about women taking part in 'hare and hounds' competitive running events. These are no handkerchief-fluttering spectators.

Lizzie's photograph of two women tobogganing on the Cresta Run in St Moritz

Women playing bandy, a form of ice hockey, in 1890s Switzerland, likely photographed by Lizzie's friend Tony Dod

I immediately want to know more. I read a few potted biographies of Lizzie Le Blond – I learn that she was 'the best-known woman mountain climber of her time', 'among the world's first three female film-makers', responsible for 'thousands of photographs', the first president of the Ladies' Alpine Club, 'often profiled in women's magazines' and author of '69 works in 220 publications in 3 languages' – and wonder why it is that she is not better known.[5]

Lizzie's photographs send a jolt through me. They make me realise that, deep down, I too had somehow subscribed to a version of women's sporting history not dissimilar to that described by the man in the shop. I'd bought into a stereotype that Victorian women were 'Angels in the House', reluctant to show an ankle, not racing around the hills with flushed and sweaty cheeks. In an instant, Lizzie's images demolish these stereotypes. They show me women engaging in both solitary and organised outdoor pursuits. It is a history that seems to have been lost. What happened, I wonder, to cause these early sportswomen to be so obscured from our view of the past? What determined that their stories would largely disappear from public memory?

Reading further into her life, I learn that Lizzie was among a number

of women who stopped participating in sport and other outdoor pursuits near the start of the twentieth century. Around this time, French aristocrat Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games and the International Olympic Committee, declared women's sport to be 'against the laws of nature'. His physical ideal was an adult man. The twentieth-century, modern Olympic spirit was defined as the 'exaltation of male athleticism . . . with the applause of women as the reward'.[6] And it strikes me that the most famous icons of early twentieth-century sport and adventure are similarly male-dominated: the Everest expeditions, *Chariots of Fire*, Shackleton in Antarctica, Baden-Powell and his boy scouts, the attempts at the four-minute mile. Where did all the women, such as the ones in Lizzie's photographs, go?

I wonder what motivated powerful and influential men such as Pierre de Coubertin to make women so unwelcome in the world of sport, and what effect that exclusion had on individual women, and on women in society more generally. Could Lizzie Le Blond's descent into historical obscurity have been a result of this systematic marginalisation of women from organised sport and outdoor spaces? After delving deeper I decide to write a book about Lizzie and how she and other women of her generation found – and lost – their own freedoms through outdoor sports.

Then, while I'm in the middle of my research, I am upended. In the space of five months, I lose five members of my family.

My father had been unwell for most of his adult life, with an addiction to alcohol that meant I rarely phoned him after six in the evening, dreading the slurring and repetitions.

One evening around eighteen months earlier, he'd sent me a text asking if he could speak to me that evening. I knew, even before he called, what was wrong. Finally, his body had given up.

Over the next year, Dad was proud to be placed on the liver transplant list, a recognition of his genuine efforts to claw back health by eliminating salt, joining a gym and staying off the booze. During this time, he received a number of TACE (transarterial

chemoembolisation) procedures – injections of chemotherapy medicine straight into his liver tumours to suffocate their blood supply. But in early 2019, almost exactly a year after they'd found the first tumour, a new one is detected: belligerent, fast-growing.

'I'm sorry I had to give you such a large dose,' the radiologist apologises after administering another TACE injection. Within a few weeks, my dad is vomiting grainy black blood. His stomach balloons above the height of his small yellow head, which rests on three understuffed hospital pillows. Dad's liver is entering the final stage of what I will learn from his death certificate is called 'Decompensated Cirrhosis' – when its damage fatally outweighs its function. He dies, on his own, in the liver ward, at two in the morning on 1 March that year.

Just days before Dad died I'd been on a train en route to visit him in hospital when my phone had vibrated with a call from my mother. 'I've got some very distressing news and it's not about your father,' she said. 'Bethany was pulled from the sea in the early hours of Sunday morning. It's not certain she's going to die, but . . .'

Bethany is my young cousin: a glorious whirlwind of bleached dreadlocks, piercings, mandalas and zest. So alive. Twirling across my Facebook timeline in haphazard videos of laughing, smooching young women. Somehow – and what happened that night will probably never be clear – after leaving a nightclub on the coast with her boyfriend, who had been arguing with her, she ends up in the sea, alone, unable to swim. It is a winter sea at high tide – bitter and violent – with waves up to fifteen metres high. Her boyfriend reportedly tries, but fails, to save her and a lifeboat is called. Somehow, she is resuscitated and taken to hospital. Over the next few days, while my father is dying in a hospital in Nottingham, machines keep my young cousin alive. But then all the tests show that she is not really alive. When the machines are turned off, she dies quickly. She is just twenty-two years old.

Months later, my uncle passes away – a shock to everyone except himself. Living in my ninety-five-year-old grandmother's attic, he

had not told anyone about his cancer, and the first she knows is when an ambulance arrives, and he is carried down to hospital, to die.

Everyone is so very sad. My mother and I are like some kind of early Christian diptych of mourning, each of us imploring the other for relief. But I cannot be – have never been – what my mother seems to want, and I cannot seem to give her what she appears to want now. This becomes too painful for us both.

I temporarily halt our contact. Within months, the estrangement between us becomes permanent and necessary. Another loss to add to the year's toll. Or maybe it is the reinscription of a loss or absence that has always been there.

I had not expected grief to be so physical. I usually run pretty much every day, but now I cannot manage it. On my first outing following Dad's and Bethany's deaths I have to stop after four kilometres. Thinking about my decimated family makes me sob. It tightens my throat and chest and makes it impossible to breathe.

But, over the next few months, I gradually start to move again.

In August, five months after Dad died, I have my first really good run of the summer. Around 6 p.m. I set off on one of my favourite local routes: five miles on a soft path around muddy fields and an empty golf course, and then home via a ragged piece of common land. I feel strong and calm throughout. I speed up in the final mile or so to arrive home breathing hard, bare skin thrumming against the warm evening air. I have a shower, wrap my hair in a towel, pull on yoga pants and a sweatshirt and go downstairs to the kitchen, where I boil a kettle for spaghetti, chop cauliflower, garlic, chilli and rosemary, toss them in oil and lemon juice and put them in the oven. While the spaghetti roils on the hob and the cauliflower roasts, I pour a glass of wine, pick up my phone and scroll through Twitter, Facebook and, finally, my emails.

There are messages from work – the daily round-up of 'university in the news' stories; an agenda for an upcoming meeting – and marketing shots from sportswear shops and a race entry website. There are also two emails whose subject lines I cannot fathom: 'Emergency

W. Brown Please Read'. I do not recognise the sender's name; it looks like junk. But my much-loved stepfather's name is Willy Brown, which surely cannot be coincidence. I open one of the emails. 'Please can you phone Willy's phone my sister has it Willy is very very poorly, sorry to email we cannot get your number.' In the moment, I do not understand what it is asking of me. I do not understand what information it is imparting.

I open the second email, which is more coherent. 'Willy has been airlifted to hospital, they think he has had multiple clots. I am so sorry.' It is from the daughter of my stepfather's second wife (my step-stepsister, I suppose. I have never met her; it's complicated).

In the event, my stepfather isn't airlifted to hospital – he dies in an ambulance on the driveway of his home in a village ten miles south of Cambridge, having developed a pain in his leg while gardening. That is it, I think. Now I have no real family at all.

The night Willy dies, I don't know what to do with myself. I send an email to my boss requesting yet another period of compassionate leave. I think I might go to Cambridgeshire to see Willy's wife, but I've missed the last train and I don't like driving in the dark. I think I might pull on my trainers and head torch and go out, for a walk or a run, by the river, to the black fields between York and Bishopthorpe. I think I might go to the moors in the morning.

Instead, I go to bed and stay there, more or less, for two weeks. There I fantasise about coasting: about lifting my feet from a bike's pedals and freewheeling. About running down a hill, arms unfurled. About my body's buoyancy in water. In bed, I starfish across the sheets, trying to recreate that feeling of ease after hard work, of floating.

At first, I think I will never run again. It seems unimaginable. I cannot even stand up straight. In those weeks I shuffle between the bed and the sofa. My eyes only open halfway. I am heavy and slow and I do not want food or drink.

At night, not being able to bear proximity to another living body, I leave my husband Pete asleep in our bed, go downstairs and watch property and house design programmes. A woman purchases a

derelict Victorian milking parlour in south London and sees in it the potential for a Parisian hidden courtyard or the secret garden of a Moroccan riad. In the early hours of the mornings, I scour Rightmove for ruined dairies and small plots of old industrial land in London.

On 4 August, I am supposed to be running a marathon: my fourteenth. I would usually spend the days immediately before and after exchanging tips and debriefing with fellow runners on the race company's Facebook page. But I lie in bed, staring at the window or sleeping. I do not open my computer or turn on my phone. I let the battery of my sports watch run down. Its assessment of my current fitness level changes from 'maintaining', to 'recovery', to 'detraining'. Finally, it switches itself off. I do not recharge it.

Years ago, I remember reading an article about a kind of 'map of mourning'. Clinical psychologist Susan Silk and mediator Barry Goldman devised a 'ring theory' of grief, in which they placed friends and family members in concentric circles, according to their proximity to the deceased – like contour lines on a mountain. People most affected by the death occupy the smallest circle, in the centre, at the summit. 'In each larger ring put the next closest people,' instruct Silk and Goldman. 'Parents and children [of the deceased] before more distant relatives. Intimate friends in smaller rings, less intimate friends in larger ones.' The rings then serve as guides for how people affected by a death might offer and seek support: 'Comfort IN, dump OUT'.[7] Mourners should not burden those who are closer to the centre, higher up the mountain. If they need support, they should seek it from those in wider circles, lower contour lines; at a greater distance from the eye of the storm, further down the mountain. The few individuals right at the top lean on others beneath them, as they attempt their slow and careful descent.

Right now, I do not know my place on this map of grief. Willy is the family member to whom I've been closest for most of my life, even after he and my mother divorced – but there is no official name for the relationship between a stepfather and stepdaughter after the

'step' between them has been dissolved. I'm not sure that I even count as a relative any more.

At Willy's funeral, I do not know where to sit. When we arrive, there are not enough places to allow me to be together with my husband and three young daughters. It is August when Willy dies and friends are on holiday and very few people offer condolences. Even when people do contact me, I am offended at the muted, insufficient nature of their messages: 'Sorry for your loss,' 'so sad', 'life is so hard sometimes'. I cannot bring myself to politely 'like' these comments on Facebook. Only the most exaggerated expressions of sympathy seem fitting: the friends who club together to send extravagant care packages – a caravan of parcels of books, magazines, cashmere socks, gin, biscuits; bags of entertainment for my children; moisturiser, pillow spray, bubble bath; pyjamas that I will not take off for days.

Then, over the next weeks and months, I realise I need to be outdoors, to rebuild the strength and health that have been eroded by grief.

But the world beyond my house appears to have changed during my absence. It now seems full of dangers and threats I had not previously noticed. One evening in the early autumn, about six weeks after Willy's death, I jog down to the river, past a buckling picnic bench around which three teenage boys sit, legs splayed, rolling cigarettes. As I run, one calls out, 'Give us a smile!' I mutter 'Fuck off' under my breath. Then I stop running and I walk back to them. Fuck it.

'I'm not here to entertain you,' I say. 'Do you have any idea what it's like to not be able to run down the street in peace?'

A boy stands. He is almost a foot taller than me, and his baggy sweatshirt hangs in pleats from his muscular shoulders. 'How dare you talk to us like that?' he says. 'Do you think you're better than us? Do you think you're too good to smile for us?' I start walking away, and he follows me, shouting, 'Fucking bitch!'

The next day, I am pedalling along the cycle path that borders our road, and a car tries to overtake me. We are both heading in the direction of a traffic island and, unable to overtake in time, the driver

violently swerves his car back towards the cycle lane, beeping. He comes so close that if I lift my hand from the handlebars, I could touch his passenger window. I raise my middle finger – fuck OFF – and ride on, and a little way ahead the traffic lights turn to red and we come to a halt beside one another. The driver lowers the passenger window, and he shouts at me, 'Fucking bitch!'

Later, I am at the train station, buying coffee and a croissant for my journey. I hand over my reusable travel mug to the barista, and a man standing in the queue behind me speaks: 'Oh, look at you, Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, trying to save the world.' I, and the female barista, say nothing. On the train, I find my reserved window seat, squeeze past my neighbour's reluctantly slanted knees, and slot myself into my chair. I put in earplugs, fold down the table and slide my croissant out from its paper bag. My neighbour has his arms outspread on both armrests, including the shared one in between us, and I have to pull the croissant apart with my elbows clamped to my ribs. He taps me on the shoulder and I remove my earplugs, and he says: 'You should really think about going low-carb, y'know.' FUCK OFF.

A month or so later, I am taking part in a long-distance trail-running race and am jogging along a narrow muddy footpath when I hear footsteps behind me. A man is coming up quickly and his eyes are focused on the few metres in front of his feet. But then he detours onto a rough track veering away from the main trail. Realising his mistake, he swears loudly and doubles back to rejoin the route. I turn to smile in anticipated greeting as he accelerates towards me. Eyes still low and ahead, he overtakes me and, as he does so, he places one hand on each of my shoulders and pushes me backwards off the path – as if I am a gate or a recalcitrant tree branch, needing to be swung out of his way. I stagger to keep my balance in the ditch and shout 'Fuck off!' after him. He doesn't look up. I make my way back onto the path, shaking with rage. A woman comes up behind. 'He was in a hurry,' she says, rolling her eyes. I tut in agreement.

These encounters are part of the fabric of ordinary life. Usually I'd probably forget about them after a couple of hours. But now, I tear up. I cannot bear any more attempts to make me feel like I do

not belong. I need to be outdoors, I need to run. It is the only way I can feel like I have a place again, in the world and in my own body. However, I'm increasingly scared to go outside.

When I originally encountered Lizzie Le Blond and pored over her images of outdoor sportswomen – women on lakes, hills, mountains, courts, rinks, pitches, footpaths, bridleways and roads – I'd felt intellectually affronted that such women had been sidelined from narratives about the history of sport. But after my family bereavements, the book I'm researching takes on a more personal and present-day significance. I start viewing the world through a lens of grief. All I can see is how women are repeatedly deprived of opportunities to be free in the world outside, and how that, in turns, leads to further losses for us – of the ability to feel strong, comfortable and at home in our own bodies and minds, to move around the world with confidence and ease, to be fully accommodated in the public sphere of work and politics.

The harassment and discomfort I experience outdoors has knock-on consequences elsewhere. I become more timid about raising my hand in meetings and research seminars; more afraid to speak to strangers; more reluctant to exit the front door without a full shield of make-up. When the world outside the house starts to feel hostile to women, it affects far more than our running and sport.

The book I'm writing starts to shift and expand. Originally, I had wanted to investigate whether the years around the start of the twentieth century were a historical turning point in which women were pushed out of such sports – and whether this departure was coerced by men such as de Coubertin and the institutions they represented. But now I am starting to wonder if there is any relationship between early sportswomen's stories and my own recent experiences of street harassment. I scribble a question in my notebook: *Are we living through a period in which women worldwide are being driven out of the outdoors?* I think back to the first questions that Lizzie Le Blond's photographs prompted in me. A few months ago these queries were mainly academic, but now they're much more personal. I still want

to unearth the stories of Lizzie's generation of *fin-de-siècle* female athletes, but I now also want to understand the constraints that women of other periods and places negotiate in order to feel free and strong outdoors. I want to delve into the obstacles that sometimes seem insurmountable and prevent us from going outside at all. I want to learn from women who have experienced exclusion from outdoor activities; to understand the different types of barrier and hostility that they have faced historically and how they have fought back against attempts to limit them. I want to learn about women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries *and* today.

Ultimately, I am desperate to find out how women, past and present, have resisted and recovered from attempts to intimidate us outdoors. I need to find a way to recover from my own griefs: from the loss of so many loved ones, and the loss of my ability to move freely outside.

This is a story which does not just lie in books, libraries and archives, but on moors and mountains too. In the telling of it, I realise I will need to run as well as to read and write.

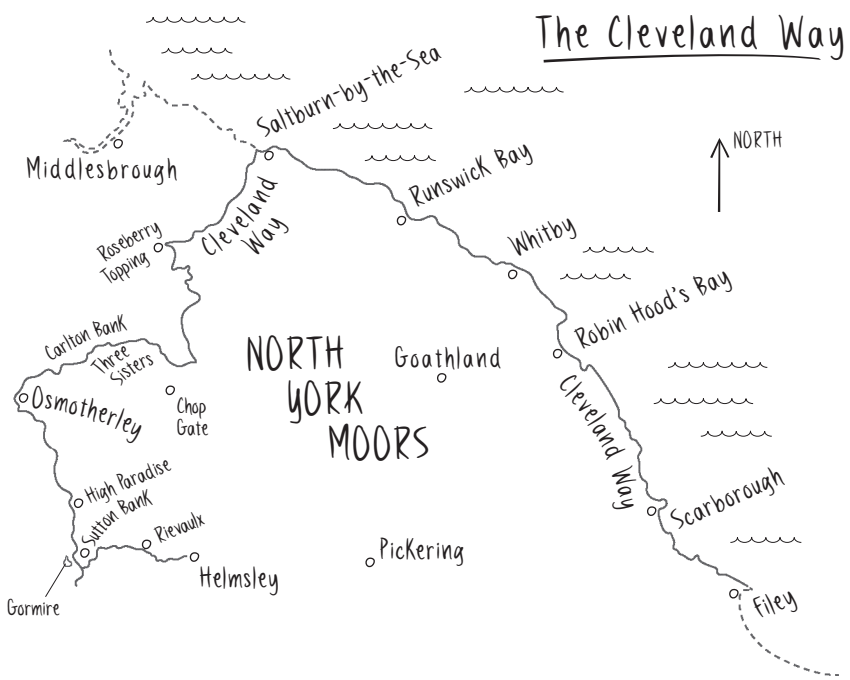
De Coubertin had decreed that being free and active and powerful outdoors was not in women's nature, but I know that's not true. I want to enter the worlds captured by Lizzie in her photographs; to learn how women staked a claim to the world beyond the home by discovering previously untapped strengths out of doors. And to see how different the natural world looks when we view it through the eyes of women rather than the men who traditionally dominate sport and nature-writing. I want to step into *her* nature.

PART ONE

Freedom

1.

Running like a girl



Every run I do is saved on my running watch and transferred to its manufacturer's database, Garmin Connect, where the information is translated into graphs. These graphs are designed to show change, mostly: a decrease in my resting heart-rate, or improvement of my 'VO2 max' (the rate at which my body takes in oxygen during exercise, which can indicate levels of fitness and endurance). But each run's dataset is also overlain by personal memories, which do not show up on this app: the stiles I clambered over, and the bushes I crouched in to urinate; the burst of endorphins that made my arms tingle; the rush of fear when a strange man leaped out in front of me. My watch's database is a type of autobiographical resource – 'My Life in Running'. It shows that running is both bellwether and bolster to my wellbeing. If I am running less, usually there is something wrong, and the missed runs make the unhappiness worse.

After Willy dies, Garmin records that I do not run at all for two weeks, which feels like an unimaginably long time when I am used to running every day. Finally, I attempt a brief run from the gym, where I leave my three daughters in sports classes and Pete lifting weights. I jog down the hill to a piece of common land, where cattle are grazing far off in the opposite corner, and onto a public right of way at the other end, bordered by twelve-foot wire fences.

Here, my legs slow and stop. I usually enjoy being distracted while I'm running: I like to mull over recipes for dinner or imagine shades of paint on a garden trellis. But now the balance is off. I am being distracted from running by grief; it is taking up too much of my bandwidth, ticking over in the background, slowing me down – as when my laptop can't cope with my requests because of updates or malware invisibly taking up its resources. My computer flags its distress with the spinning wait cursor, and this is how I feel too: like a

ball or pinwheel, spiralling with rage, disbelief and sadness. On top of all of this, running is just too much extra work.

I walk home slowly, past children picking blackberries from brambles growing up against the fences, go back indoors, and climb back under the bedcovers.

Three days later, I get up again and drive to Sutton Bank Visitors' Centre, a neat, low stone building on the western brink of the North York Moors National Park. I plan to follow a route I know well: a short version of a trail marathon I ran the previous year. I start by running along a section of the Cleveland Way long-distance footpath, along the top verge of the moors. Cleveland is the name of an old administrative county formed around the estuary of the River Tees, and straddling County Durham and North Yorkshire. It means, literally, 'Cliff-land', and it is indeed a land of cliffs, from the coastal type in the east, to the inland limestone escarpments that outline the northern and western borders of the moors, at places such as Highcliff Nab and Roulston Scar. As I run, I look down over one of these inland cliffs to the settlements below: Sutton-under-Whitestonecliffe, Thirlby, Boltby. Another village may, or may not, be down there too, submerged beneath Gormire – a lake which is not visibly fed by, nor discharges into, any overground rivers or streams, and seems to have emerged in the landscape miraculously, fully formed.

I cannot run for long. My stomach aches, as if I have been struck by a bowling ball. I half-stagger, half-trot, along the cliff edge – the way I run in dreams when I am being chased, or impeded from reaching a loved, lost person. The path passes through a small wood and then sidles alongside a farm called High Paradise until it reaches a crossroads. If I were to turn left here, the Cleveland Way would take me north along the old Hambleton Drove Road – one of the oldest roads in England, used in the eighteenth century by Scottish drovers manoeuvring tens of thousands of Galloway and West Highland cattle down to market – to a village called Osmotherley.

But I do not turn left, and instead I leave the Cleveland Way and continue dead ahead, cutting across open moor that is purpling into rust as late summer turns to early autumn. From the moorland, I

drop down through green forests and farmland and wind up in the ruins of Rievaulx Abbey. Here I buy a fizzy apple drink at the tearooms and take it to the garden, before the sensory overload of barking dogs and squabbling children drives me out. The four miles back to my starting point at Sutton Bank take me on steep slopes through lush firs, and small lakes reflecting blue skies. They make me think of Switzerland, or how I imagine it to be. I get into the car and drive back to cuddle with my children on the sofa before bedtime.

Though it has not been a remarkable day – my running has been slow and clumsy – the excursion has got me out of bed, got me moving again, and persuaded my body back into some basic routines. Grief has turned my body into a residence I no longer recognise. But I hope that I will be able to run my way back home eventually.

I hope that running will help me recover, because I have found it to be true before.

In October 2015, we – Pete and I, our three girls and our small black cat Mattie – moved from London to the north of England – to York. We moved partly to be closer to Pete's university job, and partly because I wanted to leave the south. My closest friend, Josie, whom I'd known since childhood, had just died of cancer at the age of thirty-five. It seemed less hazardous to flee the places I associated with her, and to start again, than to stay in a city where her absence would daily trip me up.

In the immediate wake of Josie's death, I picked fights with other old, loved friends. I cropped my hair short and I drank a lot. When my work contract came up for renewal, I handed in my notice. We put our house on the market, accepted an offer within a week and bought a run-down ex-bed-and-breakfast on a busy main road, a little way outside York's city walls. In London, we had known most of our neighbours by name, and we left with promises to return to the street's twice-yearly parties. Our new house had no neighbours and no street parties. We hired builders, who ripped out supporting walls and bathrooms and the kitchen, and left us with an ancient toilet plumbed into the shed and a makeshift cooking area on the half-turn

of the stairs where, every evening, I scoured inches of dust from an electric two-ring hob to heat up baked beans for the kids.

I regretted the move within a week. Our double buggy didn't fit through any of the doorways in the small medieval city. I was used to the anonymity and indifference of London's crowds and was startled by passers-by who stopped me on the pavements to tell me that I 'have my hands full' with my three small children. Mattie, the cat we brought with us from London, was soon run over and killed on the busy road in front of the house.

On the day we arrived in York, it started raining and it did not stop for four months. The river, which runs through the city centre, flooded. At first, it submerged the riverside cycle lane, and then the rain kept falling and the waters continued to rise until, in the old city, cars crossed a bridge at the same height as a boat that floated aloft on the water beside them. Rain gushed from our house's guttering down the drainpipes and engulfed the cellar. Our road flooded at both ends until there was no way in and no way out.

Not understanding then the rivers and geography of Yorkshire, I had no idea where all this water was coming from, so it was easy to fantasise that it originated inside me: a deluge of sadness. When the floodwaters finally receded, leaving a sticky coating of sludge through the city, I decided I needed to find something to reorient me up here in the north; to introduce me to the Yorkshire that lay outside the city walls. I remembered how much I had loved hiking as a teenager and told a friend how much I wished I could take it up again – but I lamented that, now I had children, there was no time. 'What about trail running?' she suggested. 'It's like hiking, but quicker.'

So that winter, I downloaded a beginner's trail-running plan from the internet. Garmin's database reminds me now that, in those early weeks, I began by jogging for just two kilometres at a time, or three: a short trudge along the river path and back. It wasn't particularly pleasant at first. My legs didn't propel my body weight with the elastic, effortless motion that other runners seemed to possess; instead, they felt like weights themselves, which I had to drag across the ground. I kicked rocks and stumbled, clutching for handholds in the

air. I was embarrassed by the swollen redness of my face, and how the soft edges of my thighs audibly rubbed together in my leggings. Running was messy and I seemed to leak constantly: urine from the prolapse that was a legacy of multiple childbirths; sweat prickling into beads across my cheeks and back and pooling between my breasts. And I was scared all the time: of breaking an ankle, of getting lost, of developing hypothermia; of having a heart attack; of being raped and murdered.

But there was joy, too, right from the beginning, and the joy was just enough to outweigh the discomforts. The initial stiffness in my legs soon receded and running started to feel more like the sort of light, scampering motion that my children enjoyed; more like playing than trudging. On odd occasions when I ran fast, a small explosion seemed to take place in my brain, flooding my system with a galaxy of happiness, making me smile and run even faster, and reminding me of dancing in nightclubs when I was younger. The fear did not entirely go, but I came to think that death was not so likely an outcome of a 5K trot around the park. And I loved spending more time outdoors. The rest of my life revolved around being enclosed: all our shopping was done online; I took my children to playgroups in the car and my working life was entirely spent in classrooms, lecture theatres, libraries and my office. Running was the only time in the week that I got to breathe cool air and stretch my limbs in damp riverside grass. And so, I persevered.

By the following spring, Easter 2016, I was able to run for an hour. During a weekend excursion in a cottage on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales National Park, I jogged up a rocky track to a cairn at the top of the nearby peak, then plunged down a steep funnel cut into the hillside to a reservoir and dam, before curving home on a gently declining path with a sharp uphill coda. Over the next year, I was able to spend even more time on my feet and I started plotting more elaborate routes. Local bus schedules and train timetables were like passwords that opened up places such as the twelfth-century spa town of Knaresborough, where I ran along a tree-lined cycle path before dropping down to the densely wooded gorge that collars the

river. My feet jack-knifed in claggy mud, my cheeks grew sticky with effort, and I ran the final descent, arms outstretched and whooping like a child mimicking a plane.

One day I ran up the steep ascent of Roseberry Topping – a hill once thought to be the region's highest, and which, because of a partial collapse in 1912 of the shale and clay underlying its hard sandstone cap, now resembles Hokusai's Great Wave. (Rather hyperbolically, it is known as Yorkshire's Matterhorn, though my children think Roseberry Topping sounds more like a type of dessert, such as Angel Delight.) By 2017, I'd started signing up for races. I didn't think it was likely that I would ever win anything – I didn't really care one way or another – but I craved adventure, to discover new routes, to have an excuse to range across Yorkshire's national parks for whole days at a time, as I used to do as a hiking teenager.

And I was still lonely, having lost my London friends and neighbours. I began eavesdropping on the sidelines of a Facebook group run by 'Hardmoors', a company which organises off-road trail races on the North York Moors. In March I took the plunge and signed up for my first trail race: a marathon taking place along the Cleveland Way later that year, in October, which would begin and end in Osmotherley, on the western border of the moors. I enrolled in some shorter events in the meantime, as preparation.

That summer, I travelled to the Lake District for one of those training runs – a half-marathon taking place the following day. In trail races – which are run off-road in the countryside, with the aim of taking runners on adventures through a variety of scenery, ground cover and ascent – distances are not precise. When run on roads, a half-marathon should be exactly 13.1 miles; but because trail-runners and race directors tend to care more about beautiful routes than about bettering their 'personal best' speeds (PBs) (or 'personal records' (PRs)) over precisely measured courses, the length of 'trail halves' can vary, between around 12 and 16 miles. There was also a full marathon on offer that day (which is 26.2 miles on road but can be anything from 25 to about 32 miles on trail) and, a month later, an 'ultra' too. An ultra-marathon is any run in excess of marathon

distance and some people use the term to refer to any event longer than 26.2 miles, while many insist that a *proper* 'ultra' has to be over thirty miles. There is no upper limit though, and, at the time of writing, the longest ultra in the world – the 'Self-Transcendence' race, in which runners cover 5,649 laps around one single city block in Queens, New York, within a time limit of fifty-two days – is 3,100 miles.

I arrived at my accommodation at Coniston Coppermines in the early afternoon – a youth hostel in a low, white-washed cottage, nestling high up above the village of Coniston in the crook of the hills of Brim Fell, Raven Tor and the Coniston Fells. Most of the hostel's residents were there to run. As I heaved my backpack through the front door, it swung wide open and a surge of air rushed in. The gust shaped itself into a woman, and as she ran past me into the hallway, she stopped and turned.

'Hi,' she exhaled.

Her lower legs were a camouflage of silt and bogwater, and neon markings on her shoes glinted through thick black peat, studded with scree. A few stems of wet hair clung to her face around a wide, buff hairband, and dripped water into rivulets of sweat beside her nose. As she bent to pick out her laces from the mud, a man emerged from the stairwell. He too was dressed in shorts and T-shirt, but he was bright and clean and holding a baby, perhaps six months old. As he approached her, she wiped her hands on her thighs and took the child from him, pressing it between one arm and the front of her tight running backpack.

'How was it?' he asked.

'Yeah, brilliant,' she replied. 'I got about thirty miles in. It's slippy though. Have a good run!' she called out as he broke into a jog, pushing through the door and out onto the fells.

Over the communal dinner at the hostel that night, everyone around the table, apart from me, was running the marathon and most were signed up for the ultra-marathon too. While eating, they compared notes, casually listing the races they'd completed, the long-distance footpaths they'd covered, the injuries they'd sustained, the

kit they most prized. The running woman I'd encountered earlier, who was now showered and free of mud, turned to me and asked: 'Are you running tomorrow?'

'Yes. Just the half-marathon though,' I replied. 'I honestly can't imagine running any further. I just can't imagine what it's like to run the distances you're talking about. Anything more than, I dunno, twenty miles seems just . . . silly. Silly distances. Mad. Crazy!'

Nobody said anything. The running woman took a mouthful of dinner and turned back to her husband.

I still hear myself now and cringe. I knew then so little about why people run – about why women run.

Five months later, it was the night before the Hardmoors Osmotherley Marathon. I laid out my kit on my bed: not just my clothes and shoes, but tape to stick onto my back, behind the clasps of my bra to stop it rubbing my skin raw; pieces of kitchen roll to wipe my nose (which drips in cold winds); incontinence pads (unwrapped and put into biodegradable freezer bags, so that, when I have to change a pad behind a tree, there is less packaging to negotiate, and a ready-made disposal bag to boot); and food – energy gels, ginger biscuits, jelly babies, KitKats, salt tablets, flapjacks and malt loaf.

There is an attraction in short runs, in leaving the house unencumbered by anything other than a front door key. I found it especially liberating after my daughters were born, to be able to leave the house so weightlessly and glide through space in Lycra, instead of struggling with bags of nappies, milk, snacks, toys and changes of children's clothes stuffed into the basket underneath our enormous buggy. But I came to realise that long-distance running offered a different attraction to those lithe, thirty-minute outings. It used the same skills required for planning a day trip with young children, but with one crucial difference. When I pack for a day out running, I do not have to think about anybody else's requirements or desires, other than my own.

Between my introduction to trail running in late 2015 and the Osmotherley Marathon in October 2017, I got to know myself, and

the way my body responds to exertion over many hours. I became conscious of the 'tells' through which my body communicates its needs. I learned that if I can be breezy and cheerful, then I have eaten and drunk enough for the moment. But boredom, irritability, a premature hankering for the finish line, and even tears, all require me to take action – a gulp of coke, a handful of jelly babies, a flapjack, a salt tablet. I learned that nausea often means hunger rather than gluttony, and that I cannot eat only sugar, which over time roils my stomach and felts my teeth. I need to take in more substantial food too: sandwiches, crisps, pork pies, salted potatoes, buttered fruit loaf and, in the later stages of a really long run, citrus – orange slices, juice, Calippo ice lollies. I learned to pay greater attention to my heart-rate, to make more effort to keep it low, to stop sweat saturating my T-shirt on steep climbs and chilling my skin as darkness falls and the air cools. I became aware of the way my left foot rocks fractionally from side to side inside its shoe on loose, stony paths, gradually abrading the skin on the outer edge of my big toe and eventually needing to be protected with tape. I discovered how a brisk wind can bring in, or brush aside, cloud cover in minutes, swapping hot sun for dense rain, and vice versa, and requiring the repeated interchange of waterproofs and sunscreen. And I learned to pace myself: to find the balance between moving swiftly enough to keep alert and engaged, but not so fast as to exhaust my reserves.

In an essay from 1980 called 'Throwing Like a Girl', the philosopher Iris Marion Young wrote about differences between men and women's experiences of participating in sport. She describes how men generally possess enough knowledge of their physical capabilities so that, when they go to catch a ball, their minds and bodies work together – they think *through* their bodies – to bring that desire to fruition almost instantaneously. But from a young age, girls and women are encouraged to see ourselves through the eyes of others: as physical objects and in comparison to external standards of beauty and perfection. Young describes how this leaves many girls and women with a split consciousness. We act at the same time as being aware of how we look while we're acting: 'the body frequently is

both subject and object for itself at the same time'. This means that when we want to catch a ball, there can be an interruption between desire and action. We do not think entirely through our bodies, but rather we tend to think about our intention and then consider our body as an instrument to attain it, 'a fragile encumbrance, rather than the medium for the enactment of our aims'.[1] Our bodies can feel like unwieldy appendages that get in the way of realising our wishes and let us down.

In long-distance running, I found – and continue to find – a way to combat this split consciousness; to know and inhabit my body as a mass of sensations and needs felt inwardly: to exist *through* my body, not apart from and despite it. Running shows me the rise and fall of the landscape, not viewed at a distance through a phone camera lens, taking snaps for social media, but felt internally, as exhaustion, elation, contentment, hunger, thirst, nausea, pleasure and pain. And the more time I spend running, the more its effects extend into the rest of my life. I'd previously thought of running as the absolute opposite to my sedentary day job – an escape – and I'd considered the moors and mountains as very different spaces to my usual habitat of streets, offices, shops and libraries. But I have come to realise that there isn't really a clear-cut opposition between these two worlds.

The way I move when I am running influences how I move more generally through my life. Experiencing free movement and a sense of physical power on the trail makes me hungry for other forms of liberation and authority in my day-to-day existence. I am sure that it is because of running that I have become better able to recognise and act on my own desires. Bit by bit I have stopped putting on make-up because of the way it clogs my skin, even though I am scared of being thought of as ugly and old. I have stopped wearing heels because of the tightness they cause in my calves, and I have started wearing stretchy clothes with comfortable, elastic waistbands, even though I hate the idea of seeming short and fat and 'frumpy'. I now eat three full meals every day, even though I worry about not being 'perfectly thin'. I no longer drink wine, as it gives me headaches and makes me tired, even though I am anxious that I may not be

effervescent and fun company with others. I have learned to urinate outside in bushes during races, even though I was initially bothered by being seen by passers-by and considered disgusting. I took up weight-training and love feeling stronger, even though, when I was younger, I had wanted to be slight and fragile-looking. I have stopped faking orgasms, even though I have always been nervous of articulating my own sexual preferences.

I have never liked approaching strangers – feeling self-conscious about the sound of my own voice, worrying that I would trip over my words, or that my southern accent would stand out in the north – but I now know there are some questions I need to ask simply in order to get around: where to pick up a footpath, or when the next bus departs, or how long a café stays open. I have realised that I have spent my life moving around the world apologetically, trying not to invite attention or ridicule – even though those attempts to remain inconspicuous have caused me problems and discomfort. Running shows me a way of moving around public space with much less self-consciousness and more of a sense of belonging – entitlement, even.

Because of running, I can recognise what I need and I do what is necessary to obtain it.

On the day of the Osmotherley marathon, in October 2017, I woke in the youth hostel to the sound of heavy rain tumbling into the waterfall outside the dormitory window. Race registration was taking place in the village hall. I opened the door and was met by air already fetid with sweat and mud; 120 runners were queuing at tables around the room, collecting race numbers, filling out emergency contact details, proving possession of compulsory kit, lining up outside toilets.

At five to nine, the hum of chatter stopped. One of the race directors, a softly spoken giant of a man called Jon, read out a briefing and the other director, Shirley, handed out plaques to runners who'd clocked up a thousand miles over previous races. We then traipsed out of the hall and up the steep road leading north to the junction where the Cleveland Way departs from the village. I stood towards

the back of the pack of runners, Jon blew a whistle and we were off, all of us plodding along a wide trail, a rutted field and into a wood where the path veers sharply and unevenly upwards. In recces I'd tried to jog up this rising track, but today the runners surrounding me slowed to a fast stride. 'That's the idea!' a voice coming up beside me exclaimed. 'You've got a good pace on you!'

Three women emerged out of the pack to my right. 'This is my first marathon,' I blurted out. 'Do you have any advice?'

'Marathon? This isn't a marathon!' cried the first woman. 'This is an ultra! It's twenty-nine miles!'

Twenty-nine miles. Nine miles further than I had ever run before. Why hadn't I read the race instructions properly?

'Is this the longest that you've run before too?' I asked hopefully.

'Ha, no!' she laughed. 'I did the Hardmoors 110 – which is really 112 miles – five months ago. I puked pretty much the whole way round! And I'm training for the Spine Race.'

The Spine Race, she told me, is a nonstop run along the 268-mile course of the Pennine Way long-distance footpath, undertaken in the depths of northern Britain's winter, when two-thirds of the seven-day time limit are spent in darkness.

'So today is good training,' she continued. 'I'll probably run a similar distance tomorrow too, but with a much heavier pack. I'm Harriet, by the way. And this is Kate, and Jayne.'

Kate's phone started to ring. She pulled it out of a pocket in her running pack, looked at its screen, and tutted: 'It's work.'

'Kate's a farmer,' Harriet explained. 'She did worry that she might have to deal with some work logistics during today's run. Anyway, you'll have a great time. You'll soon be doing longer distances. We're all doing a fifty-five-mile race together in March, so if you want some training buddies, you should come along on some of our weekend runs.' Kate gave a thumbs-up. Fifty-five miles, 110 miles, 268 miles . . . These distances seemed like a fantasy.

Harriet strode past me and disappeared out of sight. Jayne and I introduced ourselves while Kate negotiated on the phone with potato distributors. We ran up along the clearly marked, wide paths

of the Cleveland Way, into a wood and out the other side, past an Ordnance Survey trig point, through a gate and onto the sloping expanse of Scarth Wood Moor. After four miles through a forest and fields, the path dipped down into an agricultural hamlet called Scugdale and then rose steeply up again, onto Carlton Bank, a long heather-strewn ridge that forms a run-up onto three distinct, sharply rising, sharply falling hills – Cringle Moor, Cold Moor and Hasty Bank – known locally as the 'Three Sisters'. This is part of a pattern across the world – a tendency to imagine closely spaced peaks as an intimate, forbidding, powerful group of women, with hints of malevolence. There are Three Sisters in Oregon, Scotland's Glencoe and Alberta in Canada. In northern Norway there are Seven Sisters which, in folklore, were female trolls who were turned to stone as they ran down the coast, fleeing from male suitors. Mountains and women have historically been something for men to try to conquer; and such female names for geographical landmarks signify both the acquisitive nature of men's desires and their female targets' tendency to strongly resist.

After crossing Yorkshire's Three Sisters, the race course turned south and we all ran for a couple of miles along the moorland ridge of Hasty Bank, before dropping down, first into fields and then into a small village called Chop Gate (or *Chop Yat*, as Kate said it). Here I used the public loos and grabbed a cup of warm, flat coke and a flapjack at the checkpoint, and began to chat cheerily with the marshals – but neither Kate or Jayne seemed to want to hang around and were already jogging out of the car park. After I had sprinted to catch them up, we immediately set off steeply uphill again, trudging for ten minutes or so up Wether Hill until we reached the ridge at the top, which turns to head northwards, back to close the loop and rejoin the Cleveland Way at the point where, a few hours earlier, we'd been steeling ourselves to begin crossing the Three Sisters. But now we turned the other way and followed our outgoing route in reverse: back along Carlton Bank, down into Scugdale, through the wood and up a series of steps that, in the morning, I'd barely noticed descending, but now stretched up in front of me like a biblical ladder. A familiar needling

pain was beginning in my right knee, and I stopped momentarily to stretch out my thigh muscles, flex my ankles and catch my breath. When I finally emerged from the wood, panting and sweaty, a marshal pointed me up along the road: the old Hambleton Drove Road, which rises up above a reservoir glinting through gaps in the surrounding trees.

Here I left Kate and Jayne and felt strong enough – despite my knee; despite the fact that I'd been moving nonstop for nearly seven hours – to run, not walk, up the gently inclining footpath. A mile or so later, at an old drovers' inn called Chequers, my sports watch clocked 26.2 miles: the official distance of a marathon. There were still three miles to cover before the end, but I whooped to myself, pumped an arm ('Yesssss!') and took a selfie.

Now I knew I would finish.

Forty-five minutes later, after careering happily downhill from the drove road, across a beck and hauling myself inelegantly up the handrails that ascended the other side, I completed the race. I ran into the village hall, 7 hours, 41 minutes and 22 seconds after setting off that morning. Once I'd collected my finisher's medal and T-shirt, I spotted Harriet bearing a cup of hot, sweet tea and a slice of fruit loaf for me.

'You're buzzing!' she exclaimed with satisfaction.

I was.

After Josie's death in 2014 and our move to York the following year, the exercise schedule that had taken me from short jogs along the river path, to running my first marathon in 2017, helped me find a new home: greater comfort in my own body and in the world at large.

I think that is why I have this hope now: that running will help me to live with these new griefs, the terrible devastation that has ripped through my family and the wider sense of dispossession that has come with it and is related to living in the world as a woman. I set myself a challenge – a programme of hill reps, interval training, tempo runs, long runs, recovery runs, resistance training and

stretching to bring me back fitter, faster, stronger. I reckon that a year sounds like enough time to bring about this change, my recovery from grief.

I search race entry websites and start making a shortlist of races taking place at roughly this time next year. My target will need to be a race that's longer than I've ever run before, to mirror the task of endurance before me. I see a listing for the West Highland Way run: a ninety-five-mile race along the entire route of the long-distance footpath from Milngavie (outside Glasgow) to Fort William, at the foot of Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain. The race is run nonstop, with a thirty-five-hour time limit, and it will take place on 20 June 2020, close to the longest day of the year and eleven months after my stepdad's death. It is a trail that I have covered before, hiking a long time ago in my teens, before all this loss and sadness. It seems perfect. I write the date in my diary, download a '100-mile-ultra training plan' from the internet, and cross my fingers that my entry in the ballot will be successful. With a new sense of structure and progression, there seems to be hope again. I instantly feel better.

As I go to shut my laptop, I catch sight of an advert for a different race: the Lyke Wake Challenge. The strange name rings a bell. After I'd got home from that first marathon, in Osmotherley in 2017, I'd sent some photographs taken during the race to Willy. One was of a signpost bearing the outline of a black coffin, to which he'd replied, excitedly: 'Aha! *Lyke Wake!*'

I'd never heard those weird words before, but now here they are again.

I click on the link and learn that the Lyke Wake race, held annually on the nearest Saturday to 10 July, was originally part of the Osmotherley Summer Games, and then later became an independent running 'challenge'. It takes place on a forty-mile footpath called the Lyke Wake Walk, which spools more or less horizontally across the entire width of the North York Moors, from Osmotherley in the west, finishing at Ravenscar in the east, at the sea. The walk was named after the 'Lyke Wake Dirge', a

Cleveland folk song from the Middle Ages. (*Lyke* means corpse, and *wake* being the ritual of watching over the corpse between the deceased's death and funeral.) Rather terrifyingly the 'Lyke Wake Dirge' describes the trials that the soul undergoes in that period between death and burial, comparing that transition to a crossing of a 'whinny' (thorny) moor:

When thoo fra hence away art passed,	*(When you have passed away from here,*
Ivvery neet an all,	*Every night and all,*
Ti Whinny Moor thoo cums at last,	*To Whinny Moor you come at last,*
An Christ tak up thy saul.	*And Christ takes up your soul.)*

According to the dirge, the moor crossing that immediately follows death involves a series of tests. If, while alive, the dead person had ever charitably given away 'hosen and shoon' (socks and shoes), 'meat or drink' or 'siller an' gawd' (silver and gold), then after death their soul is equipped with strong footwear, hearty sustenance and safe footholds, to allow them to cross the whinny moor unscathed, until 'Christ tak up thy saul'. However, if they had been mean and held onto their possessions during life, then in death they are forced to walk across the moor barefoot, pricked 'to the bare bane' by thorns, consumed by fire and deprived of footholds at the 'Brig o' Dread'. They would then '*doon tumm'l tiwards Hell fleeames'*.

The forty-mile Lyke Wake crossing was devised as a walk by local farmer and writer Bill Cowley in 1955. At three in the morning, the lonely heather had reminded Cowley of the dirge's hazardous moorland and, by the end of the arduous route, twenty-three hours after setting off and feeling like a corpse or 'lyke' who had gone through purgatory himself, Cowley had drily adopted the dirge's name for his new footpath.

The traditional Christian funeral oration, Psalm 23, conceives of a life lived in the 'shadow of death' as a walk through a valley, but as

the shadow of death falls upon me now, it seems to me that recovery from grief may be more like an ultra-marathon across an exposed hilltop. I think about the hazards of the moor: the peat bogs whose black, crumbly surfaces might hold firm or give way without warning to swallow a leg thigh-deep; the roaks, or hill fogs, that can suddenly wall up before your eyes. Ticks that might burrow into the folds behind your knees, imparting fatal Lyme disease. Adders lazing beneath gorse on warm stone paths.

Such hidden dangers resonate with my earlier experience of grief five years ago, after my dear friend's death in 2014, when there were some days and nights in which memories of her unexpectedly stung the whole surface of my consciousness. Yet on other days, I felt oddly cocooned from it all, and able to carry on as normal. I realised, then, that grief is a surprisingly physical experience, much more like illness than I had anticipated, and unpredictable. It strikes me that a moor crossing is not just a fitting metaphor for the soul's travails after death, but an appropriate path for my journey as I learn to recover, write and run my way through grief. It is a metaphor made literal: as part of my training plan to run the West Highland Way, I will be spending most of the next year running across Yorkshire's moors.

Apt, too, is the fact that the Lyke Wake Walk begins just outside Osmotherley. According to local folklore, Osmotherley's place name is a contraction of 'Where Osmund's Mother Lies' (or 'Oswald-with-his-mother-lay'). The legend describes how the mother of a villager named Osmund (or Oswald) went to collect firewood one bitter winter's afternoon and did not return. Her son went out to search for her, and found her lying on the ground, close to death, having fallen. Unable to carry her back to safety, he lay down beside her in the snow, and there they died together.

The Osmotherley legend is rooted in the ties that bind us to our mothers. I think about my own mother, who seemed to me to be lacking in ties, either to her own mother or to a fixed home, and who repeatedly moved house in search of the 'motherland' that eluded her. I think I inherited those missing roots and, maybe

that's why, in the wake of estrangement from my biological mother, I'm looking for foremothers elsewhere. In a world in which I've come to feel dispossessed from family, home or physical ease, I am looking to pioneering women who found freedom outdoors for the reassurance and belonging which I need.

2.

The high life

I start my research by looking for my running foremothers in the nineteenth century, in an era before Pierre de Coubertin declared women's sport to be unnatural.

But my search for historical trail-running women, specifically, meets an early hurdle. Running and most outdoor sport, was not always as clearly defined and specialised as it is now. Today, sky running, fell running, trail running, cross-country, track, athletics and road running are all distinct disciplines, with their own separate events, clubs, competitions and constituencies. Running is often considered a very different pursuit to hiking or rock-climbing. For much of the nineteenth century, however, the boundaries were far less obvious. Running was rarely a discrete activity, a form of motion practised on its own – people did not tend to 'go for a run'; it was usually one element of an array of different pastimes.

In September 1858, Mariana Fox Tuckett wrote in her diary about a blissful day on holiday in Cornwall in which she scrambled on rocks, went on a long hike and turned down a carriage ride to 'walk (& run)' twenty-odd miles with her cousin Helen.[1] Outdoor adventures frequently began or ended with carriage or horse rides. In between, participants rambled, sprinted, jogged, scrambled and climbed – sometimes all in the same excursion. And often they used the term 'mountaineering' to describe this hybrid form of outdoor exploration, in which both men and women ranged widely, on foot, hands, hooves and wheels, over hills, cliffs, moors and mountains. So, instead of searching specifically for foremothers who were purely runners, I decide instead to look for my antecedents among historical female *mountaineers*.

I look again at the images taken by Lizzie Le Blond of her cohort of intrepid outdoor women. I wish I could bring those monochrome

and sepia women back to life, to learn what the outdoors meant to them. I wonder how Lizzie came to be in the mountains in the first place: what were the circumstances that saw her entering the hills for recreational purposes, and what did she find there? Were there any hints that, within two decades, athletic women were to be so vilified and excluded?

I turn first to Lizzie's autobiography, published in 1928, six years before her death. Its strangely bland title – *Day In, Day Out* – belies the varied, energetic nature of her life, but in the initial pages, she describes her first joyful, proper visit to the mountains. It was in late June 1881, when she was twenty-one, that she 'set out and saw for the first time those glacier-clad Alpine ranges which were to mean so much to [her] for the rest of [her] life'. Lizzie had been suffering from suspected tuberculosis for the last few years. It was a disease that was then widely thought to be hereditary, and treatment for it was largely palliative – a 'change of air' to help the lungs. Earlier that month, a 'dear old friend and doctor' had 'ordered [Lizzie] to Switzerland' for the clear, clean air after a social season of 'balls, dinners, etc., in quick succession [had] proved too much' for her.[2] There she initially discovered that altitude and strenuous physical exercise seemed to alleviate her symptoms, but mountaineering would become so much more than that to her: it would offer an education, a social experiment, an alternative family and opportunities for hard work, respect and fame.

When Lizzie first started mountaineering, its most visible participants were from social groups similar to her own: the wealthy, white, upper and upper-middle classes – those with disposable income, personal connections and the luxury of free time in which to indulge in leisure activities, exploration and adventurism. Today, outdoor activities are far more accessible to all, aided by initiatives such as the Outward Bound Trust's diversity team, the walking communities Black Girls Hike, Wanderlust Women and Bonnie Boots (a Glaswegian hiking group for BAME women), organisations for hikers with disabilities (such as the Disabled Ramblers and British Blind Sport) and

groups concerned about social inequality, such as Carers Stepping Out and the Horton Women's Holiday Centre (a cooperative non-profit in the Yorkshire Dales offering affordable holidays to women and children). Because of the diversity of its participants, today the 'great outdoors' is not associated with a uniform, universal set of meanings and practices: hiking, climbing and running mean different things to different people, and different demographics have widely varying experiences of sport in rural settings. And actually the same could also be said of the nineteenth century. Even though books, newspaper articles – and, later, photographs and cine films – focused on the upper and middle classes, early sporting communities nevertheless included a wide range of participants, for whom the outdoors held a range of different associations, even if some of those enthusiasts' experiences were far less frequently recorded and publicised and have therefore been largely forgotten.

Lizzie had been to Switzerland on another occasion before her life-changing visit of June 1881 – probably the previous year. The sights had then seemed underwhelming: the Jungfrau mountain had appeared 'nothing more than a far-off vision of glittering snows on which none but the foot of folly could ever wish to tread', and she had not been much moved by the Alps generally. She had even spoken scornfully of mountaineers as 'wicked' and risking their lives 'for nothing'. And in 1881, when Lizzie travelled with a friend ('Miss H') to the low-lying village of Interlaken, and then on to Montreux, it seemed again that Switzerland, despite its fine air, would in other ways disappoint her. But then some new visitors arrived at her hotel – 'a party of young people' who told her to 'venture farther afield' – and she 'determined to take the management of my health into my own hands' and make the fifty-mile journey and 2,000-foot ascent from Montreux to the higher mountain resort of Chamonix. Lizzie stayed there for several weeks and her health began to improve. 'The fresh mountain air seemed to put new life into me,' she wrote, and 'in a few days I could leave my sofa and sit out in the pine woods'. Two more friends joined her and, after dipping their toes into the joys of outdoor leisure with a few short carriage

drives, and horse rides, they all bought alpenstocks – tall walking sticks with sharp chamois-horned tips – and started climbing.[3]

First, Lizzie and her friends rambled to the Mer de Glace, France's largest glacier, on the northern slopes of Mont Blanc. Then they crossed the nearby Le Mauvais Pas, a perilous rocky passage, and next went up Le Brévent, a mountain of medium height, via a steep, zigzagging path now known as the Vertical Kilometre. Lizzie and her friends paid for records of each expedition to be charred into their alpenstocks. The sought-after mountain guides they had hired to show them routes and techniques, Jean-Pierre Balmat and Alphonse Charlet, were impressed by the young women's determination and enthusiasm, and suggested more ambitious trips – perhaps even to the Pierre Pointue, the lookout point over the Bossons Glacier, just over a third of the way up the north face of Mont Blanc, western Europe's highest mountain.[4]

The very same evening that Balmat and Charlet raised this possibility, Lizzie and her friends met a young woman in their hotel who had just climbed Mont Blanc as far as the Grands Mulets Hut, a mountain refuge lying 3,000 feet higher than the Pierre Pointue. 'We gazed enthralled at one so brave,' Lizzie recalled, though she could not imagine herself climbing so high.[5]

Nevertheless, on a clear-skied morning soon afterwards, on Monday 25 July 1881, Lizzie's maid helped her to put on riding clothes – the closest she had to proper mountaineering garb – and 'with high-heeled buttoned boots and shady hats', she and her group set off up the first slopes of Mont Blanc, hoping to make it as far as the Pierre Pointue. After around three hours of continuous climbing on foot, Balmat and Charlet mentioned that they were carrying a rope and raised the tantalising possibility that Lizzie herself could be up to the Grands Mulets, far beyond the Pierre Pointue, in a couple of hours, if she wished. Two members of her party decided to stay put, but Lizzie and a female friend pressed on with their guides, the party of four walking in a line, tied together with rope like beads on a string. In their high-heeled riding boots and long skirts – and with next-to-no previous mountaineering experience – the women scrambled across treacherous glaciers