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This book is dedicated to you – and every start line you cross.
May the journey bring you joy.

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PROLOGUE – BARCELONA

'Our running shoes have magic in them: the power to transform a bad day into a good day, frustration into speed, self-doubt into confidence, chocolate cake into muscle.'
Mina Samuels, author

I suppose it's too late to back out of this, but I tell you what, I'm bloody tempted.

I'm one of 11,000 people crammed behind the start line of the 2011 Barcelona marathon and I very much expect I'm about to get found out. I've not done the proper training. I wanted to, but I've been injured. And also, let's face it, I'm not a real runner. Unlike every single person surrounding me, fit, athletic, toned, making last-second adjustments to shoelaces, shorts, expensive watches. They're obviously proper runners. Not me.

I began to feel like an imposter in the hotel breakfast room first thing. They'd opened especially early for us marathon runners ('us runners' – ha!) and while I dithered and nervously nibbled at a stale croissant, the others were all piling into the porridge, merrily munching on muesli and greedily guzzling granola. A fitter and more focused collection of

people you could never hope to see milling around a breakfast buffet. They terrified me.

None of this did I convey to my cousin, also named Vassos, who was sitting opposite, beaming with excitement. He'd done all the training, and more. Also, importantly, he'd already run four marathons. He knew he had this. I watched as he wandered off languidly to toast more bread. He fitted in perfectly.

Indeed the only question in my cousin's mind that morning was what time would he run? By contrast, questions churning around in my head included:

Will I have to stop and walk? (Probably)
Will I finish? (Probably not)
How mortifying would it be not to finish? (Very)
How far until it hurts?
Will I even last a mile on my dodgy knee?
What does 'The Wall' feel like?
Do I honestly want to know?
What if I'm last?
What happens if I can't continue?
Will the people of Barcelona laugh at me?
Is there sufficient medical cover?
Why am I doing this?
And mostly, how can I possibly,* possibly *need another poo?

Of all the pre-race surprises assailing my thoughts and senses, by far the most shocking is how often I seem to need the loo. Surely by now there's simply nothing left? I go for a

third time straight after breakfast, a fourth before leaving the hotel room. And as we emerge into milky Barcelona sunshine, I dive back into reception for 'No. 2' number five.

Almost 100 marathons and ultra-marathons later, I do still feel compelled to do multiple pre-race poos. The maranoia, on the other hand – that strange, hypochondriacal pre-race madness that affects marathon runners (and drives their friends and family potty) that's largely gone, I'm pleased to say. But in Barcelona it was all-consuming.

In fact, those questions churning around my mind on the start line are the culmination of a fortnight of fretting. For two weeks, every walking step has seemed to aggravate a different body part. I've had trouble sleeping through the aches, pains and niggles. I even ruined a family weekend in Bath, sulking because I was convinced my ankle was about to implode. All pure maranoia.

And speaking of potty, I wonder briefly if the problem in my bowels is down to something I ate last night. Cousin Vassos and I had inadvertently invented a private, marathon-eve tradition as we wandered into a city centre restaurant in search of carbs. It was the sort of place we imagined Catalan locals dined at for special occasions. That's probably exactly the vibe they were hoping tourists would feel, and it worked a treat. We were seated in the middle of a busy yet understated dining room, ordered a beer each and cheerfully asked our waiter to bring whatever food he suggested would help the two of us run a good race the following morning.

I'm not sure the waiter was well schooled in the delicate art of marathon nutrition, but he certainly knew how to lay on a

proper feast. Dish after wonderful dish was laid before us, all colourful, all bursting with flavour, all dripping in oil, like nothing we'd ever eaten before. After a brief moment considering the wisdom of eating these new concoctions on the eve of a big race, we decided to simply relax and go with the flow.

Well, what a flow! Massive plates of pork, snails, onions, smoked sardines, seafood paella, even oxtail with foie gras. This was before I went plant-based, obvs. We revelled in the thrill of ignoring all the sensible advice we'd ever been given about eating a tried-and-tested, simple supper the night before a marathon. *Don't risk running with an upset stomach*, they say. We both went high-risk in Catalunya that night.

Not that we knew it at the time, but Barcelona was to be the first of many one-night European odysseys – fly somewhere on a Saturday, run a marathon the following morning, home by Sunday evening. And from Bergen to Copenhagen, Ljubljana to Prague, we searched out the most eclectic restaurant to gorge ourselves on local delicacies, the weirder the better. We knew that one day we might live to regret it, but the risk only added to the enjoyment.

No risk of any enjoyment on the Barcelona start line. Nerves are so loud they're verging on panic.

The man on the public address system starts the countdown. Oh God, now I urgently need a wee. I have a matter of seconds to consider this latest setback before the hooter sounds. The marathon is underway! Around me, everyone starts shuffling forwards towards the start line. I'm in with the group expecting to finish in around 3:30 – only because I followed my cousin in here – and in the few minutes it takes to reach the start, I make a snap decision to remove the

timing chip from my shoe and discard it. If I'm going to fail here, and let's face it, I probably am, ain't nobody gonna know about it.

Whenever I've needed to pee mid-race since, I think back to those opening few yards in Barcelona. As we all started running and I was flipping the timing chip to the side of the road, my bladder felt full to bursting. By the time we'd reached the first bend in the road, it was as if I'd never needed to go at all. I'm pretty sure I didn't wet myself in the meantime. So either, I thought, this whole urge to wee was psychosomatic, or my body modified the signals it was sending to my brain because it knew bigger problems now lay ahead: 26.2 of them.

Though actually, around two-thirds of those went gloriously smoothly.

I'd been looking forward to passing the famous Camp Nou stadium, home to FC Barcelona, and was thrilled to discover the route went right around it. And five miles done already.

I was also pleased that the Sunday morning streets were relatively quiet. Loads of cheering Catalans would emerge later but they'd do so, quite rightly, in their own good time. Which meant to me that there were fewer people to witness my inevitable disgrace as I pulled out of the race.

My long runs in training had built up to 16 miles, but no further. The planned 18- and 20-mile runs in my 17-week plan were abandoned due to a dodgy ankle. It also put paid to all running for the past month.

As it turns out, 16 miles in training with a month-long taper gets you through 18 miles of a marathon in good order.

I'm resolute. I'm focused. I'm enjoying myself. I've long since stopped fretting about anything and everything, and – whisper it quietly – I almost feel like I belong here. In fact, as a Greek, I'm allowing visions of Pheidippides to fill my head.

Now in case your ancient Greek history is a little rusty, let me briefly remind you about Pheidippides. He's the heroic ancient Greek messenger whose fault all this is, basically. If it weren't for him, you definitely wouldn't be reading a book called *How to Run a Marathon*. And I'd be a lot less sweaty generally. I wonder what we'd all be doing instead.

In 490 BC, Pheidippides ran from Marathon to Athens, around 26 miles, to deliver news of a near-miraculous victory in battle against the Persians.

I'm colouring in his epic journey as I pass the 18-mile marker in Barcelona. I'm imagining the nascent Greek democracy and the state of dread and fear Pheidippides would have been running home to. He had joyful but urgent information. If the massed ranks of invading Persians had won, which by rights they ought to, then they planned to subjugate the Greeks and destroy their civilisation. In Athens, the only option would be to set fire to the city and head for the hills. Democracy as we know it would have died in its infancy.

But somehow the Greeks prevailed and our hero needed to get word home before his fellow citizens did anything rash.

Now poor old Pheidippides had been having quite a week of it. He'd already run 300 miles to Sparta and back, unsuccessfully, begging for help. And he'd doubtless fought in the bloody battle as well. So, 26-odd miles later, when he arrived back in Athens to deliver his victorious message, the poor

chap collapsed and died of understandable exhaustion. But the marathon was born.

I'm hoping for an equally jubilant, but rather less fatal, conclusion to my first-ever marathon. And I've got to say, so far, so good. I've come two miles further than I've ever run in my life and I'm still feeling strong. Also – this comes as a massive surprise – I appear to be keeping pace with the runners around me. Cousin Vassos may have disappeared up the road, but the 3:30 pacer is still around here somewhere. I begin to believe that everything might actually be okay. I won't just finish, but finish well.

Then everything starts to unravel.

A man directly in front of me stops running and pulls to the side of the road, clutching his hamstring flamboyantly. It serves as a trigger. After that, most things in my body begin to hurt and my legs feel like they're running through treacle.

Beautiful monuments come and go: the magnificent Sagrada Família cathedral, a century in the making and still unfinished; the long, tree-lined promenade Las Ramblas; the Port of Barcelona, with its yachts, ferries and container ships. But I'm largely oblivious, wrapped up in my troubles. Fleeting thrill, running through the huge, ornate Arc de Triomf, then straight back to fretting about my Bambi legs.

Other runners are streaming past me now, and I seem to be running in slow motion. I'm giving it everything, but suspect I may be even going backwards. I notice the route is passing the open doorway of our hotel. I imagine myself back inside, perhaps in a bath enjoying a well-earned beer. It *would* be well earned too. After all, I've run further than ever before. Surely there'll be other opportunities to

complete a marathon. I should celebrate the 20-plus miles I've managed, not lament the few that got away. Simply stop running, and start running a bath …

Major realisation number one: nobody would care if I surrendered now. Literally nobody. Not my cousin, not my wife or young children, not any of my friends.

Major realisation number two: I'd care. Dammit. I'd care a lot.

Conclusion: I'm finishing this. Somehow, if at all possible, I'm finishing.

It's actually rather liberating. Take 'give up' off the menu, and all that's left is 'carry on'.

Every footstep now feels like an event. Runners stream past in their hundreds. But I'm locked into my determination and refuse to be dispirited. I discover something about myself through those painful, laboured miles. It's since become the biggest weapon at my disposal: a simple willingness to just keep going. Even when the finish line seems impossibly far away, on legs that will surely implode any second … Just. Keep. Going.

Another six miles seems inconceivable, preposterous. But another six paces doesn't. So I break down the distance, get to the next water station, mile marker, street corner, tree … And go again.

Eventually it dawns on me that there's only a mile or so to go and I allow myself to believe that I'll finish. I could crawl home from here. I calculate that my current, glacial rate of progress will see me come in just outside the four-hour mark.

And suddenly I'm Popeye after a can of spinach. I find a little burst of, well, not speed exactly, but certainly increased

pace. I cross the line just as the excitable announcer tells the now-crowded start/finish area that everyone's been running for four hours exactly.

If you're being kind, my gun time is 3:59:59. I don't have a chip time because I threw away my chip in the morning panic. My stopwatch says 3:56:01.

I see my cousin waiting on the far side of the square. I try to wave but my arm refuses to move. The tiredness is exquisite. I have just completed a marathon.

Yes, it's been done before. But not by me.

And now it's your turn.