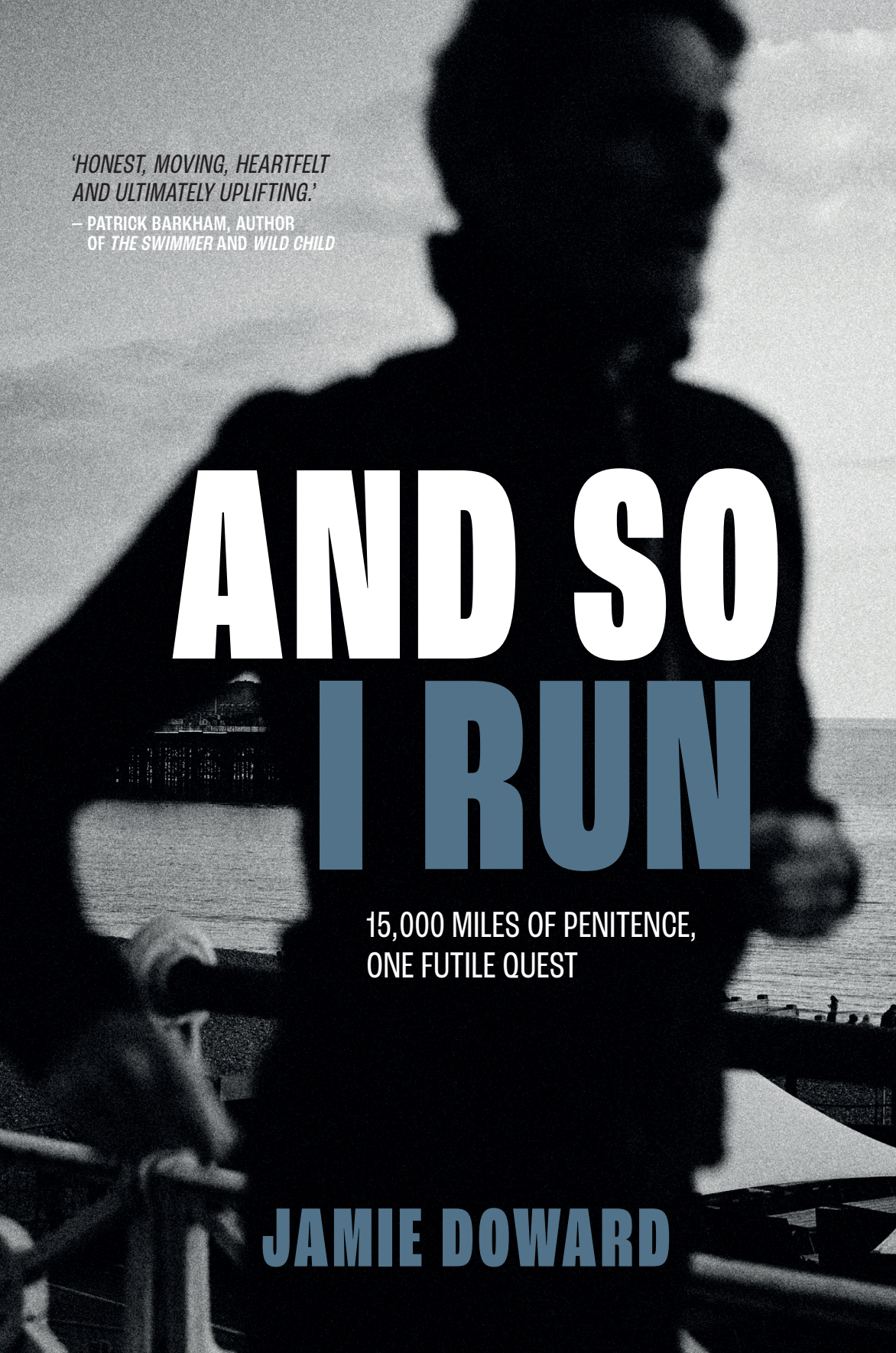




*'HONEST, MOVING, HEARTFELT
AND ULTIMATELY UPLIFTING.'*

— PATRICK BARKHAM, AUTHOR
OF *THE SWIMMER* AND *WILD CHILD*

AND SO I RUN

15,000 MILES OF PENITENCE,
ONE FUTILE QUEST

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MILE 2

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I have lost control of my thoughts. They have become my sworn enemy. Waves of them keep rushing over me. I cannot stem the tide. Here they come. Smash, crash, bash. It's an ambush of the Sassenachs and I am being massacred.

So you've never been to Musselburgh before today, the thoughts ask me in a pantomime Scottish accent. And how's that working out for you, laddie?

Anger courses through me. I'm incapable of rational thought. I'm incapable of finding beauty in anything. A red mist has descended upon me. I'm murderous.

Idiot, my thoughts mock me. You should have saved yourself the pain and stayed away. What were you thinking? I mean, look at this place! Ugly, pebble-dashed houses, fronted by gardens littered with broken plastic tables and chairs mottled by salted sea rain. They glower like tombstones along a flat, denuded strip of Scotland where scrub meets pavement and both sides grind out a goalless draw worthy of an Old Firm game at its worst. It's Trainspotting-on-Sea.

There's a Co-op, I see at some point. A racecourse. And some sort of power station, I think. Was that a power station I passed? Probably. I mean, I had enough time to drink it in. It's not as if I'm going very

fast. Mile after painful mile just stumbling along. Just. Stumbling. Along.

And then there's the sea, of course. The North Sea, from which a powerful twenty-five-kilometre-an-hour wind attacks my face for the last seven or eight miles of what I know will be my first and definitely last bastard marathon.

My internal swear count goes off the Richter scale. I am furious. Fucking furious. Mainly with myself for doing this. Actually, no, with everything. Fucking everything.

Fuck the wind. Fuck Scotland. And definitely fuck Edinburgh. Fuckers. They call it the Edinburgh Marathon. But we're fucking miles outside the city. Where's the fucking inspiring fucking famous Georgian fucking architecture to fucking inspire me home over the last fucking miles? Where the fuck is Arthur's Seat? Or that parliament that cost a fucking ton of taxpayers' cash? I've been too preoccupied by the pain, the drudgery, the horrific relentlessness of running 26.2 miles to pay attention to the scenery, if indeed we even passed these landmarks. I wouldn't put it past the fucking Scots to lie about geography. The fuckers. Remember Bannockburn. Weird, angry, unhinged thoughts swamp my mind. *Saw that Alex Salmond in a London pub once. Should have given him a piece of my fucking mind about Musselburgh. But then I didn't know then what I know now. I mean, how could I? I'm fucking in the present and that was in the fucking past. Fucking obvious, isn't it? But why am I always so focused on the fucking past?*

The anger is pumping through my lymphatic system. Each stride pushes the bile deeper down inside and my mind is so scrambled, so fizzing with rage at the unfairness of having to run so far that my lexicon is becoming massively, catastrophically limited. Perhaps irrevocably. Every other word is *fuck*. I'm so fucking, fucking fucked. My legs are burning. They are being dissolved by lactic acid. Soon they will be just stumps. Bleeding. Gangrenous.

Medic! Man down. We need an endorphin shot here, now. Then ship him on the last chopper out of here, do you hear me, soldier? But where the fuck are my endorphins, nature's painkillers, when

I need them? Running is supposed to be triggering them, but they've gone AWOL when I need them most. Fucking cowards.

I'm so tired. So fucking tired. We're on a dual carriageway. How did that happen? I'm hardly concentrating. It's just too tiring, drinking it all in, all this ... stuff. Scenery. Sky. Sea. Whatever. I just want everything to end.

Never. Running. A. Marathon. Again.

For one thing, it clearly makes me xenophobic. Until this day, I have loved Scotland and its people. But this marathon is messing with my mind. It's scooping stuff from my id that I never knew was there and smearing it across my synapses so that sense, reason and perspective are eroded, replaced by a seething, pulsing hatred for everything and everyone. Why would anyone run this sort of distance? How on earth can anyone suggest it keeps them grounded, balanced, calm? It's clearly impossible to be any of these things when you are as furious as I am.

Across the other side of the road, I can see a hulking, canvas-roofed truck scooping up the super-tardy, the hapless dregs who are some eight miles behind me. How long before it scoops me up, too? The ignominy. The relief. How long before I can give in? I want to give in. I've given it my best shot. Well, a shot, anyway. I can stop right now, I tell myself. Of course I can. I won't judge me.

Right, that's it. I'm going to stop. Yes. It's the right decision. But you'll regret it. And you have so many regrets already, can you really afford another? No, I'm going to continue. *Stop. Go. Stop.* No, I'm going to keep going. *No, I'm not.* How can you move in a forward direction wrestling with this level of inner conflict? Just what signals are the collapsing mind sending to the crumbling body?

A water stop. Some fucker in a kilt – I kid you not – is trying to high-five the guy dispensing the water bottles. I'm trying to grab one but the kilt guy pulls his hand away from the water dispenser guy and dances some demented jig to show what a fucking wacky, happy-go-fucky guy he is. As he does so, he distracts the water dispenser guy so that he drops the bottle he was holding out for me, leaving me with no bottle to grab, just ozone-rich Scottish air.

But I can't wait for him to grab another bottle to hand me.

Stopping now would be marathon death. I have to keep moving. There is no alternative. What an utter fucker kilt man is. Demented rage courses through my bloodstream. Waves of self-pity take hold. I'm going to complain. To someone. Anyone. Angry thoughts are on a loop. *Where the fuck is Alex Salmond? I saw him once. In a pub. Did I mention that? I'd have a few things to tell him about his fellow countrymen.* But then I'm Scottish, according to some scroll that I once got at a museum. I'm part Welsh too, I know that for sure. What I'm definitely not is a runner – that's one tribe I'm never going to belong to.

I stumble on, my mind poisoned by a million rabid thoughts, mainly about kilt man and the Tarantino-inspired revenge I would like to enact upon his person. I realise that until this moment I have never hated anything in my life as much as these last, wind-smashed miles. My sweat-soaked cotton T-shirt chilled by the sea breeze feels like it's made of chainmail. It's so heavy. I'm dragging chains, that's what I'm doing. I'm Jacob-fucking-Marley in medium-priced trainers and a dank T-shirt – the same one, I believe, in which I successfully resisted fellatio in an east London bar five years previously. Oh to be back there. There'd be a different outcome to that night now, I can tell you ...

If only I had discovered wicking. But I'm wearing something that actually retains sweat, something that is weighing me down like it's made of magnets, sucking up iron filings from the road as I drag my way across an unsparing Scotland, a land denuded of joy, hope, life.

Six miles to go, then five. I want to sleep. I really want to sleep. Can you sleep and run simultaneously? I attempt a novel experiment but immediately jolt myself awake when I turn my ankle and almost vomit in pain. Turns out the answer is a big, fucking, awful no.

Lemon-yellow flowers protrude from green gorse bushes clinging to the roadside. Above, dark grey clouds are rolling in from the sea. In these last few miles the crowds are getting noticeably bigger. Earlier there were just a handful of people here and there along the roadsides, but now there are hundreds lining up outside corpse-grey shops and homes. Fuckers. With their smiling faces and flags and shouts of encouragement, they're just torturers in Barbours, these

people. They are gloating. They love to see pain. Why don't they just fuck off out of it, the fucks? I'm done, I'm so done. I need to sleep. Anywhere. Just here, by the side of the road, among the scrub. I'll sleep and I'll never wake up. *Saw that Alex Salmond once ... in a pub. Scotland, my home nation according to the weird scroll thing from the machine, will be my final resting place. I might make the local paper. Tributes paid to journalist who died attempting his first marathon. 'He died doing what he hated,' a friend confided ...*

One thought consumes me, just one: how the fuck did it come to this?

Well, I know how it didn't come to this, and this is what's so catastrophically disturbing. It wasn't an accident. I didn't stumble into this. It was premeditated, this disaster which, in my mind at least, has now acquired the epic proportions of a failed Victorian polar mission. This was murder, not manslaughter.

In fact, there was a hell of a lot of preparation that went into this entire fiasco. Because I know that the one thing I'm not is one of those people who simply think that they can run a marathon on sheer MENTAL STRENGTH alone. In my brief attempt at becoming a runner, I've come to learn that they are legion, these people. I'm amazed how many of them are out there. They are people who seriously believe that their mental fortitude can transform their bodies into powerfully efficient running machines. They're the sort of people who will take part in fire-walking exercises or sponsored skydives and afterwards claim that anything is possible. They're unbelievable, the people in this deluded cohort. Their inability to fathom reality and their need for instant gratification is triggered by a desire for cheap self-validation. They're probably active on X.

But I know this truth and I've learned it painfully: there are no quick fixes in marathon running. You cannot 'think' yourself into running 26.2 miles, whether you're Stephen Hawking or Steven Seagal. You will read in other books that the battle you must overcome to run 26.2 miles is purely mental. Throw these books away now! They've been lying to you, offering a quick fix, one symptomatic of a modern age that has no time for time. Really, all it takes

to run a marathon is to spend a huge amount of hours pounding tarmac, every day, every week for months and months. And months.

Malcolm Gladwell puts it best when he talks about the Beatles. Why did the Beatles become the greatest band in the world? It was because they spent thousands of hours perfecting their craft in dingy Hamburg nightclubs before launching themselves in the full glare of 1960s Britain.

Or as John L. Parker Junior puts it memorably in his novel *Once a Runner*, it's all about the 'trial of miles, [the] miles of trials.'

It's about being comfortable in the uncomfortable, going to places you'd rather not go to and staying there for much more time than you'd like, so that the next time you arrive at this location it's marginally less unpleasant. And the time after that. And the time after that. And ... I just didn't put enough hours in.

This is the abiding thought that crashes over me, smashes me against the shore as I stumble over the finish line, determined to find a wheelie bin to sleep in, my private refuge that will protect me from the wind and rain and the pitying looks of others: I should have done more miles, more long runs. Three 20-milers in my training were just not enough to prepare me for the true horror of the marathon experience. *The first twenty miles are just transport, they say. The first twenty miles are just transport.* Why didn't I pay attention to others? Why did I think I could game the system?

Tired. I'm so very tired. I can't stop yawning. My ashen face is just one big dark hole where my mouth once was. I've become a living embodiment of Munch's *The Scream*. I need to sleep. Really need to ... What was my time? I look down at my watch, but the act of moving my head is almost more than I can manage. My shoulders feel higher than my skull. They are so tense, so twisted, steel coils rusting in the Musselburgh wind. My neck appears to have disappeared, crushed by the repetitive strain of supporting a lolling head that for the last eight miles or so was determined to rest itself on my chest. I drag my arm up in front of my face to read the watch. Three hours thirty-four something. I try to process this information, to put it into context, but who cares about time any more? Who cares about anything? Certainly not me. I just need to sleep. Just need to ...

MILE 2

I close my eyes, will myself to a merciful, temporary oblivion.
Just how did I end up here? What past catastrophes conspired to
put me in this god-awful present?