

# I

## The race against time

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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