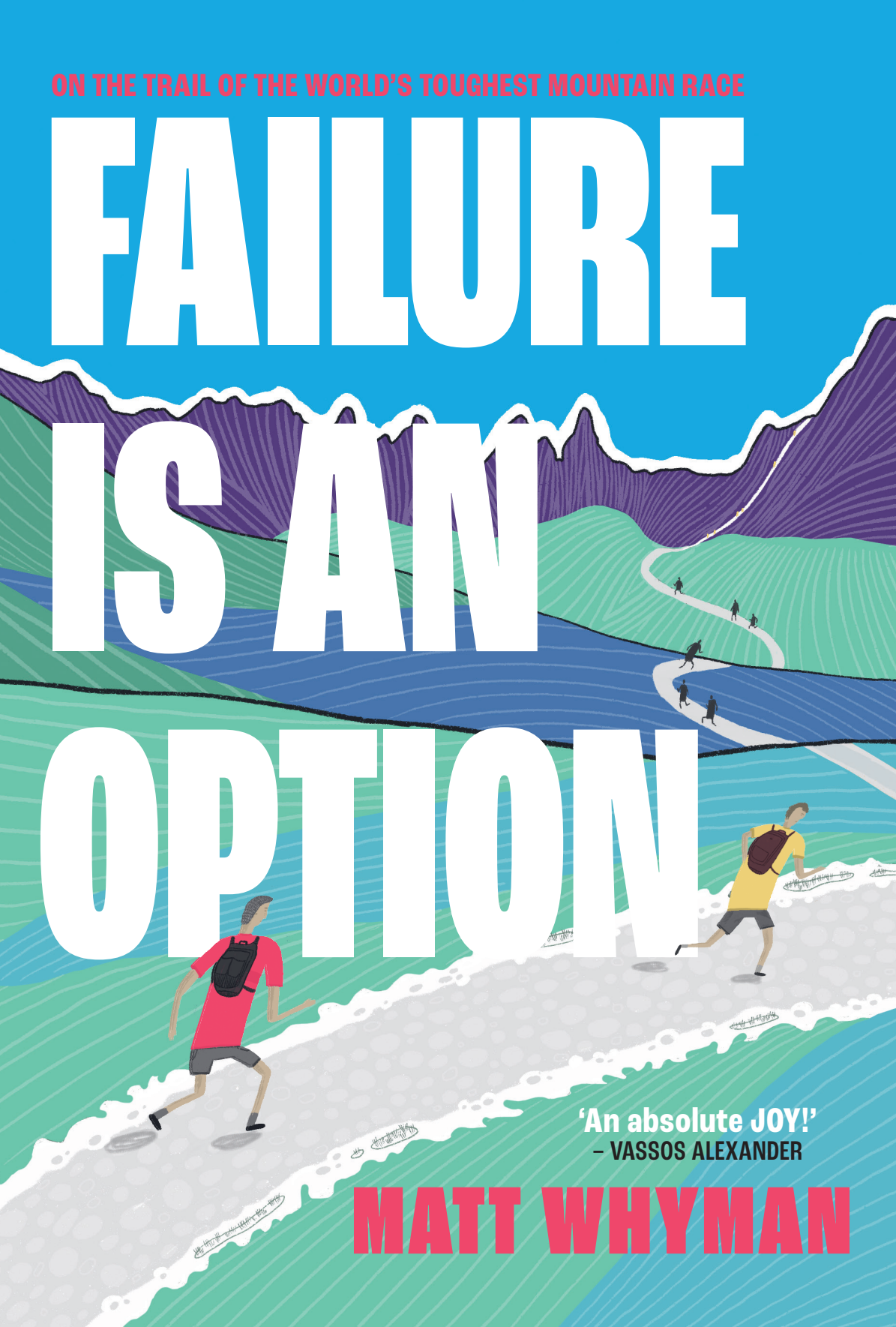


ON THE TRAIL OF THE WORLD'S TOUGHEST MOUNTAIN RACE

FAILURE IS AN OPTION

A stylized illustration of a mountain trail race. The scene is set against a bright blue sky. In the background, there are purple mountains with white snow-capped peaks. Below the mountains are green, rolling hills. A winding white path leads through the hills, with several small figures of runners. In the foreground, a blue river flows through the landscape. Two runners are prominent: one in a red shirt and black shorts running towards the left, and another in a yellow shirt and black shorts running towards the right. The overall style is graphic and colorful.

'An absolute JOY!'
- VASSOS ALEXANDER

MATT WHYMAN

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*In memory of my mother, Rosemary,
who started something to find a moment of peace.*

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PROLOGUE

Anyone who has crossed Crib Goch will be wiser for the experience. Some might also find themselves prematurely older than the years they have lived.

This vertiginous ridge is the most challenging means of summiting Snowdon (Yr Wyddfa), the highest peak in Wales. It's a long knife-edge of a route, 923 metres above sea level at the highest point, with steep-sloping drops on each side. Whether you're a rock hopper or a rank amateur, setting out to reach the far end touches you. I still have some way to go, but already I've learnt a valuable lesson: the toughest challenges are those we face when we've come too far to turn back.

'We're not at parkrun any more,' I mutter to myself, quietly longing for the presence of nice marshals in high-visibility vests. I am just over midway across the ridge, and frankly amazed that any member of the public can have a crack at this if they think they've got what it takes. Even without my glasses, which does little for my nerves, I am pretty sure I can see the curvature of the earth. Crib Goch is classified as a grade 1 scramble, which sounds quite fun until you're here. Then the experience redefines itself for many as a code-brown crawl.

Far below me, inside this mountainous horseshoe with Snowdon at its apex, a lake glitters in the sunshine. A scenic path winds around the water's edge in places. It's smooth, flat, sheltered and would make a lovely stretch for a light jog. From there, I would perhaps pause to peer up at the scattered, ant-like procession of thrill-seekers on the ridge and shake my head disapprovingly. Instead, here I am in a cross-wind, having sweated exclusively through my palms since I ascended the giant curtain of rock to reach the ridge, with questions about my own decision-making.

In a bid to face my fears, I know this is the right thing to do. It's part of my training for a race that expects competitors to take this section in their stride. As a reflection of what's in store, however, it leaves me wondering what the hell I was thinking when I signed up.

In the world of endurance running, the Dragon's Back Race is a monster. Across six days and 380 kilometres, this legendary, intimidating and punishing event traverses the knuckled spine of Wales. Runners begin in the grounds of Conwy Castle in the north, heading south across the wild and rugged landscape to the ramparts of Cardiff Castle. In crossing the entire country from coast to coast, they face 17,400 metres of elevation, which is almost twice the height of Everest. The terrain is largely trackless and challenging at every turn, from steep climbs to tumbling descents, soul-sapping bogs and rock-strewn fells. There are no course markings. The whole thing is self-navigated, with regular checkpoints and tight cut-off times. Then there's the weather, which can be unpredictable and elemental, while competitors must keep one eye on the skies as if they're vulnerable to being picked off by winged, fire-breathing beasts. This last bit might be a stretch, but could come as a blessing for some in a mountain race with a reputation as the toughest and most brutal in the world.

To level with you here, I am not naturally cut out for this calibre of racing. If you're looking for a story about an elite runner pushing for the win, I can safely predict before the race has even started that this story won't end with a massive trophy on my mantelpiece. My map-reading skills are basic and long-forgotten, like French at school. I hate heights, and if there's one thing I loathe more than that, it's camping. I'm from the south of England, which is all but made from cotton wool and a long way from fell-running country. My exposure to brooding, craggy mountains is mostly limited to stock photos on my computer screensaver, and yet here I am. Why? It all comes down to a love of putting one foot in front of the other, which lies at the heart of this race and then takes it to an extreme.

There is a reason why I have paused at this point on the ridge. It's not because I'm frozen in fear, which does strike the unfortunate as they make this crossing. Behind me, I had come across one poor guy crouched tight against the rock face with his back to the wind. His companion stood over him, seemingly immune to danger, and sounded like he was trying out reassuring words in the hope that

something might lift this spell. He had exchanged a look with me as if to say everything was under control, which was a relief because I'd have been no help at all. I might look like I'm comfortable in all the gear I intend to wear for the race, but until I've broken myself into this environment it just feels like fancy dress. All I could do was offer him a smile as I manoeuvred around them, well aware that it wouldn't take much for my own composure to slip and turn me into a statue. I just had to keep progressing, hand over hand, foot over foot, and even taking my anchor points to five with my backside where possible. Despite inching along like a dog with worms, I had even dared to think that I might nail this. Ahead, a tombstone of rock obscured what I had believed would be the home run to the other side. I had duly clambered to that point feeling like I was over the worst, only to stop in my tracks before a break in the ridge behind it shaped like the socket for a missing tooth.

'Oh, come on,' I said in exasperation, mostly to myself but also to Mother Nature.

In my research, conducted from the comfort of my sofa back home, I had seen photographs of the rock formation I now faced. Relaxing with a biscuit in one hand and my phone in the other, I just hadn't appreciated the sheer scale of what was known as Crib Goch's Third Pinnacle. Behind me, the preceding two pinnacles had presented no surprises. They were about as challenging to traverse as speed bumps, which had hardly served to slow my ponderous crawl. Taking into account the fact that this one was preceded by quite a deep pocket in the ridge line, the towering slabs on the other side rose up like a scene from Lord of the Rings.

Up until a few minutes ago, when the tombstone had obscured my view, I'd been able to keep one eye on some people ahead. Two women had simply picked their way across the ridge as if they were out for a stroll, and clearly not from this world. Most others, like me, had considered every move they made as if it might be their last. I'd followed the line taken by the pair, constantly on the lookout for the 'polish in the rock', as one of them had suggested when they passed me on the clamber up. Despite feeling like one of those idiots who go up on to the roof in a storm to fix the TV aerial, I found that sticking to the well-worn lines across the top had provided me with some confidence.

Then the third pinnacle had revealed itself to me, and all that fell away.

I see no sign of the two women. I can only conclude that somehow they've negotiated this monolith in my way and are pushing for the point where the ridge joins the tourist footpath to the summit. There is an alternative reason for their disappearance, of course. I just don't want to give it space in my mind. Through my untrained eyes, there appears to be just one way to progress. After gingerly clambering down to the platform in front of the pinnacle, and basically seeking any excuse that I can to postpone the inevitable, I decide to call my wife, Emma. We had last spoken before I started the climb. I'd left her at home for the weekend, promising to take good care of myself. Despite my assurances, I know she'll be worrying. It'll also be good for me to hear her voice, I think to myself, while summoning the favourites on my phone.

Without my glasses, which I use for screen work, I find the list of family members is just a blur. Having stabbed at what I believe to be my other half's number, I catch my breath when our eldest daughter picks up. Grace has just qualified as a doctor, living and working away from home, though she mastered the requisite no-nonsense outlook on life before her fourth birthday.

'Sorry,' I say. 'I meant to call Mum.'

'What's wrong?' she asks me after a moment. 'You sound stressed.'

'I'm not stressed,' I protest, in an octave that suggests otherwise.

Just then, a gust of wind whistles through the gap in the rocks where I'm standing. The silence on the line tells me it didn't go unnoticed.

'Where are you?' Grace has been purposely excluded from my plan to push my fifty-something body through hell later this year. I'm aware this race is something I should've done in my prime. Now it's a question of taking it on before time runs out on me. Given my daughter's medical insight, and the fact that I'm her dear old dad, I didn't think it would be wise to put her in the picture. 'Are you at home?' she presses me. 'You don't sound like you're at home.'

'Just out getting some fresh air,' I say and then attempt to steer her from the cliff edge of truth by asking about her week on the wards.

Fortunately, I've accidentally rung her at a busy time. I've no doubt she'll call her mother in due course and extract what's really going on. For now, I say good-bye as casually as I can for a man on a precipice with his heart in his mouth, and finish the call. Next, with the phone pressed to my nose so I can read the names, I successfully ring my wife. When Emma's answerphone kicks in, I leave her the

kind of jaunty message I imagine I'd share from the other side, and then drop in that I love her just in case.

Before stowing my phone, I take one last precautionary measure. Clutching an outcrop of rock with my free hand, I take a selfie with Snowdon's majestic east face behind me rising from the lake shore. It's just the shot I want because after putting myself through all this I plan to absolutely milk it on Strava.

Then, mindful that I must keep moving in case the fear finds me here, I step across to the foot of the pinnacle. The only line I can see involves climbing upwards and then swinging out on to a ledge to the right. I've read enough to know that this is the bad side, with a plunging drop if it all goes wrong. From where I'm standing, it's impossible for me to see what follows above and beyond the ledge. I just have to trust that following the shiny, worn stones will lead me safely over. There are plenty of handholds in the wall of the rock. I just can't ignore the abyss on that flank.

With my heart kicking, I shake my arms down to my hands and fingertips and then breathe out long and hard.

'Unless you do this,' I tell myself, 'it's all over.'