

From the author of *Running for My Life* and *A Midlife Cyclist*

RACHEL ANN
CULLEN

RUNNING
FOR
OUR
LIVES

Stories of ordinary
runners overcoming
extraordinary adversity



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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Ashling Murphy.
She was just going for a run.*

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PROLOGUE

Diary entry, April 2015

The doubtful voices come. Usually, it happens when I am trying my best to be brave, and I'm trying very hard to do that today. You see, I have an idea ... and it won't go away. As I lie in the bath contemplating all that running has been in my life up to this point, my head keeps jumping between memories that are scorched into my brain. First, I am an overweight teen struggling to jog for more than a few minutes on a treadmill ... then SWITCH ... I am a thirty-seven-year-old woman winning a twenty-mile road race ... SWITCH AGAIN ... I am sixteen years old and struggling to breathe while barely even jogging up the slightest of inclines ... SWITCH BACK AGAIN ... I am crossing the finishing line of the London Marathon in three hours and seventeen minutes. As my head flips between the juxtaposed realities I have lived, I know that I want to share my story.

'You can't do that!' ... 'Nobody even cares.' ... 'Why would they want to read your story?' ... 'Who do you think you are, Rachel?' ... 'Get back in your box.'

When it happens, my first instinct is to scurry away and hide. *'It's a fair point,'* my logical mind responds to the mocking taunts. *'Why should anyone care? What do you have to say that anybody would possibly want to listen to? What's so special about your story? In fact, what's so special about you?'*

I am obedient by nature. My first instinct is to obey. WHAT AM I THINKING? For a brief moment it works, and I turn on my heels as though I'm about to do it – to head straight back into my box.

But then it happens. The tiniest fluttering of objection. And it is only

a fluttering, but I notice it and I am willing it to become stronger. I try to give it some space – room to expand as though it needs a quiet place and a growbag. My logical, over-thinking, self-berating mind is momentarily silenced. He is left huffing in frustrated breaths over in the corner. ‘*Why won’t she LISTEN to me?*’ he humphs, as I stand with my back to him, waiting for the brave voice to emerge.

I desperately want bravery to win. I don’t want to be beaten back by self-doubt. I’ve long since realised that courage is not an end destination – it’s a lifelong journey. Taking tiny steps forward. Clambering over self-doubt, dodging him when he stands in the way and shoving him out of the path when necessary. There isn’t a moment when bravery holds up a victory salute or self-doubt reluctantly waves the white flag. He will always try to bully his way to the front – his bombast and arrogance presuming that he will be heard.

Well, he won’t be heard. Not today. Bravery takes his place at the table. He quietly settles himself down and makes himself at home. I can’t hear self-doubt any more. He’s burnt himself out. And I’m glad about that, because me and bravery? We’ve got work to do.

I am going to tell my story.

I am going to write it in a book ...

Three years later ...

Diary entry, January 2018

It’s Friday evening and I’m lying stretched out on my living room floor with newspapers and magazines scattered all around me. I have a small and sadly ever-decreasing pile of Quality Street chocolates to my right, which is offset by a miniature pot of untouched M&S super green salad to my left. The disparity seems both crude and predictable, but I’m okay with that.

My life hasn’t been normal for approximately one week now. I’ve already come to terms with the challenges of being a reluctant extrovert and my initial apprehension at facing this inevitability courtesy of sharing my story in the pages of a book. But the shocking thing is the degree to which I am successfully pulling it off. Nobody is more surprised than I am. ‘You

sounded so relaxed during the Marathon Talk interview, Rach.' 'Great job!' 'This interview is brilliant, Rachel!' 'Well done!' 'You were fab!' 'Totally nailed it.'

And so it goes on ...

I've heard from old schoolfriends, childminders, long-lost cousins and workmates from two decades ago. I've been spoken to by the one mum in the school playground I hoped *wouldn't* acknowledge my existence, and quizzed about my PR schedule in a Halifax nail bar, where an old lady sat listening in bemused silence, picking up on the words 'mental health' only to interject with, 'Some bloke threw himself off the motorway bridge last week, didn't he? Poor soul.' Silence ensued.

But on a manageable scale, and in a very – *very* – small way, my story is impacting on people. I know it. I can feel it. As those people who have (and many more who haven't) known me read my words on the page and hear my voice, I get the distinct feeling that I'm not alone – and I can't tell you the joy that brings me. To know that all the years of sadness, madness and quiet, invisible lostness didn't count for nothing; that my efforts to pull myself back from the brink of despair and discover that my story *matters* – hear that again: TO KNOW THAT IT MATTERS – means everything to me.

This is when I begin to realise ...

I was *never* alone.

Three years later ...

June 2021

It's a strange feeling – like a deep sense of knowing that something isn't quite right. Perhaps in reality it's been building for a long time, but I get a sense that something is about to break. The pains in my legs have been getting worse and growing more and more intense – I've recently described them to various medical professionals as 'shooting pains' or like a constant, uncomfortable fizzing sensation firing up and down the backs of my legs. Not to mention the fact that I feel cold all the time. I hadn't really thought about any of that ... until now.

I've been put in contact with a highly regarded sports coach who immediately advises me to have some blood tests. 'Really?' I ask him, as though it's the most preposterous idea in the world, but I guess he's right – we do need to take a look at what's happening *underneath the bonnet* (I do love a body/car-maintenance analogy).

I immediately make arrangements for some private blood tests, but this has already set my mind spinning on an endless loop of 'what-ifs'. What if something *is* wrong with me? What if they find that something isn't working as it should? I've never fully contemplated that there might be an underlying issue here – which sounds ridiculous, I know. What's worse is that my mind has now exploded with a series of runaway 'worst case scenario' outcomes and I can only see the most unhelpful, unlikely eventualities.

Nothing happens quickly enough. These things take time. Firstly, I have to wait a few days for the DIY blood-testing kit to arrive through the post, and then I must make my own arrangements to visit a friend who is medically qualified and can take the blood samples for me. I have no idea how crazy this runaway trail will become, or where it will lead me.

In the meantime, my diary is crammed full of Zoom calls with runners who want to share their stories with me. I can't help but wonder why this is happening now. It must be for a reason. Every time I speak to one of these people and hear about their experiences it leaves me with a sense of running's incredible power to help people overcome pretty much anything that life could throw at a person. All while my own body feels to be falling apart.

With the prospect of uncertainty looming over my own health, I find myself being captivated by Carly's story and how she survived two breast cancer diagnoses. I am utterly absorbed in my discussion with James as I learn about his mental health struggles throughout his treatment for testicular cancer and the years beyond, when omnipresent fear of the unthinkable replaced what were once happy, cancer-free thoughts.

In recent years I have heard from people who have read about my experiences and feel they have been helped in some way by my sharing them in the pages of a book. But this is like complete role reversal. I am now the one being supported. I am the one benefiting from sitting with my

headphones on and listening to these people – fabulous, brave, extraordinary and yet entirely *ordinary* people who have found a way to overcome adversity and to not only survive, but do far more than that. These are people who have chosen to live fiercely and to be fully alive. They are no longer content with the alternative.

Meeting these people and hearing their stories is inspiring and life-affirming, and it gives me every reason to believe that whatever is happening to me ‘underneath the bonnet’, it will be possible for me to not only survive it (remember we are in ‘worst case scenario’ catastrophising mental health free-falling territory here) but to *thrive*. That is easy to write but not so easy to do in practice, as I will soon discover. Theory is always a sod in that sense. I don’t know how or why, but I get a definite sense that these incredible people are helping me in some way. I am gaining strength by hearing their stories.

It’s fair to say that everything has changed. My running has changed and the reason *why* I run has changed.

Initially, I ran because I wanted to get away from a version of myself that I hated. I wanted to run away from the excessive weight and the self-loathing; to escape the name-calling and the shitty relationships.

Many years later, I ran to regain my identity and perhaps even to create a new one on the other side of motherhood. I’ve banged on about that journey in another book, but the reason I ran was to prove to myself and my daughter that motherhood wouldn’t eat me up and spit me out. I ran to show myself that I could be physically and mentally strong – perhaps even stronger – on the other side.

And then for a long while I ran to feed my incessant running ego. I raced most weekends and achieved some pretty fast times* (*subjectivity caveats apply). No matter how much anxiety I felt about my running, no matter how utterly consumed I was with fear over the outcome, I would push on and on, demanding more and more of my body.

That didn’t end well.

At the beginning of the Covid pandemic, running became a sanctuary for me. It became a way for me and my daughter, Tilly, to connect, and it became an escape from the shock of our normal lives dissolving right in front of our eyes.

At the same time, the races stopped. There wasn't the same opportunity for me to constantly feed my running ego. It made me reconnect with running and realise that I don't need the outcomes or the PBs to validate me. I began to realise that the day-to-day joy I feel from running far surpasses those brief glimpses of personal glory.

And although I'm not saying there isn't a place for goal-setting and dream-chasing, I realised that for me to have an ongoing, lasting relationship with running, I can only do that without the fear. I am so done with waking up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night before a Parkrun, completely terrified about how many seconds off my PB I might be in the morning. I am done with the unhealthy connection I used to make between my race performance on any given day and my self-worth. I decided that my relationship with running will be based on joy. None of my running achievements will ever be taken away from me, but along with those there are many horrible memories of fear, dread and crippling anxiety which I can honestly live without.

I made a deal with myself: if I can't enjoy my running journey and take pleasure in the process, then I shouldn't be on the journey at all.

And then came my recent health issues, which included low iron levels and a herniated disc in my lumbar spine.

Having lived with all the different running versions of myself, I am inspired more than ever by the stories of everyday runners just like me. I want to try and understand what it is about running that works for us. How does it make the challenges of life seem ever so slightly more surmountable? What do we have in common and how are the threads of our running stories familiar, even when our life experiences might be so very different? Why is running such a sanctuary for us? How does running help us in big and little ways?

It is an understatement to say that running has changed me, but that is only half the story. The person who emerged on the other side of running

PROLOGUE

wasn't the finished product. Even after the heartbreak of losing running in 2017, as hard as I tried, nothing else felt the same. Nothing filled the gap that running had left. In coming to understand and see running in a completely new light, in the dawning of the *real* reason why I run and the daily joy it brings me, it has enabled me to let go of a version of myself that almost caused me to lose running entirely, and my mental wellbeing in the process.

This is a collection of running stories that inspire me. These people are not celebrities or elite athletes, but real people who are living ordinary lives. Like me, they go about their daily business and have collectively experienced every imaginable obstacle in life which might ordinarily throw a person into a downward spiral. Thankfully, that hasn't happened. Instead, each one of these incredible individuals has found solace in running, as I have learnt to do. In appreciating the real power of running to help us manage everything from day-to-day mental health struggles to all-consuming grief, this is my way of saying thank you to those people who continue to remind me of all that I have learnt along the way.