IT GETS WORSE

Words by James Adams – Photography by David Antoine

Once upon a time in New Mexico I was looking forward to going home at the end of summer and telling everyone I made it. That I made it all the way across the United States of America on foot. I hoped to have collected some great stories along the way: great views seen and friends made, bunions and blisters, animal attacks and bewildered locals, greasy burger bars and dodgy motels. Moments of crippling depression and euphoric highs. Running into a sunny Central Park on a Saturday afternoon to mark the end of an epic journey. The best summer holiday ever. Not to mention a great big bushy beard.

BUT NEW YORK SEEMED EVEN FURTHER AWAY THAN IT DID AT THE START.

When I set out from Los Angeles 19 days ago, this all felt doable. Now I've covered 800 miles, crossed two deserts, two states and some beautiful mountains it feels impossible. I've already made friends I know will be friends for life, have been overwhelmed by the unbelievable kindness of strangers and experienced some of the highs and lows that got me into these situations in the first place. I am still a long way from the finish in New York, though: 2,400 miles. I am still a long way from the finish of today.

I have had diarrhoea for four days now and it is not getting any better. All the food and drink I try to consume gets thrown back out again from one place or another. I am empty; my legs can barely stand as my body chews itself up from the inside. I am shaking and sweating all the time. I don't know what my body is finding to burn but somehow it stays upright.

I can take the vomiting, the feeling of being punched in the stomach and my legs wobbling like jelly as I stagger along this highway. What I can't bear is the thought of just passing out at the side of the road, waking up in an ambulance and being told: "Hey James, don't worry. You are fine but the race is over for you." I couldn't bear going back and telling everyone I didn't finish.

I look up at the long and winding road to the finish; it's about 30 miles away. I can't see any of the other runners; they are all too far ahead. I feel like a burden on the organisers who have to hang back to support me. Perhaps I should drop out for everyone else's sake?

No. I'm not going to drop out. Not consciously, anyway. I had already decided that I was going to give everything I had to stay in this race. The problem is that now I am overdrawn. I don't know what my body is burning to keep me going. Fat and muscle? Brain? Organs? My soul?

I shuffle forward slowly, obsessing about every mile post and incline in the road. Every churned-up piece of bitumen or passing truck represents an obstacle to me finishing. I can't walk for more than 500 metres without having to throw up – or worse. I am determined to get through this no matter what but fear that soon it will be out of my hands.

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It's still very hot and I see a dog sprinting towards me from a small building in the middle of nowhere to warn me not to encroach on his space. I hate dogs. I've hated then for about two days now. Every other time I've been charged by an aggressive dog I've just looked the other way and carried on walking, making no eye contact until I couldn't hear it anymore. I've done this about 20 times in the past three weeks.

But this time I do something a bit different. As the dog starts to gallop across the road I just freeze right there on the spot. Then shit myself.

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As the dog gets closer and the warm feeling of defecation humiliates me I just burst into tears. That dog could just rip me up for all I care. Shitting myself and then crying about it? Am I two years old? There I am on the side of a road having done just that at the age of 31.

The dog didn't even bother after that. Among the many things he could surely smell was the aura of hopelessness and feebleness that surrounded me. He just walked back, having decided not to waste any of his dog breath on such a pathetic human. I had just been patronised by a dog. In my own voice, in my own head, I heard the repetitive phrase: "James Adams, you are the most pathetic human being who has ever lived." It was hard to argue.

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The folder labelled This is Your Life, which contains my most significant moments, has a new addition. These last 30 seconds of my life did not pass through any temporary phase, any holding area for editing before deciding whether to keep or discard. They just went straight into the place I store memories like my first kiss, first kiss with someone I love, finishing races, graduating, leaving home, epic holidays and adventures. A space that will contain future experiences like my wedding day, the births of my children, death of a loved one, disease, being called "granddad" for the first time... perhaps even running into New York. These events just dropped straight in there and there is no way I can ever delete them.

I carry on, hoping to find somewhere to clean myself before the support team find me again and try to get fluids into me. I am dry like a prune, sunburned, heat-exhausted, and now with the warm feeling of a full nappy. Some end to the story this would be.

I imagine going home and my friends and family asking me what I did this summer.

"HEY JAMES, REMEMBER THAT TIME YOU TRIED TO RUN ACROSS AMERICA BUT IN THE END YOU ONLY MADE TWO WEEKS AND GOT SCRAPED UP OFF THE SIDE OF THE ROAD IN A POOL OF YOUR OWN FILTH? THAT WAS HILARIOUS."

But what others thought now paled into insignificance compared with the new objective I had given myself. There was no way I could ever overwrite what had just burned into my brain. The only way to reduce the damage was for me to do something that would make that experience seem insignificant in comparison to something much better.

Whatever motivations I had for doing this race – the personal challenge, the storytelling, bragging rights, adventure, travel and exploration or whatever – I now had a much, much bigger one.

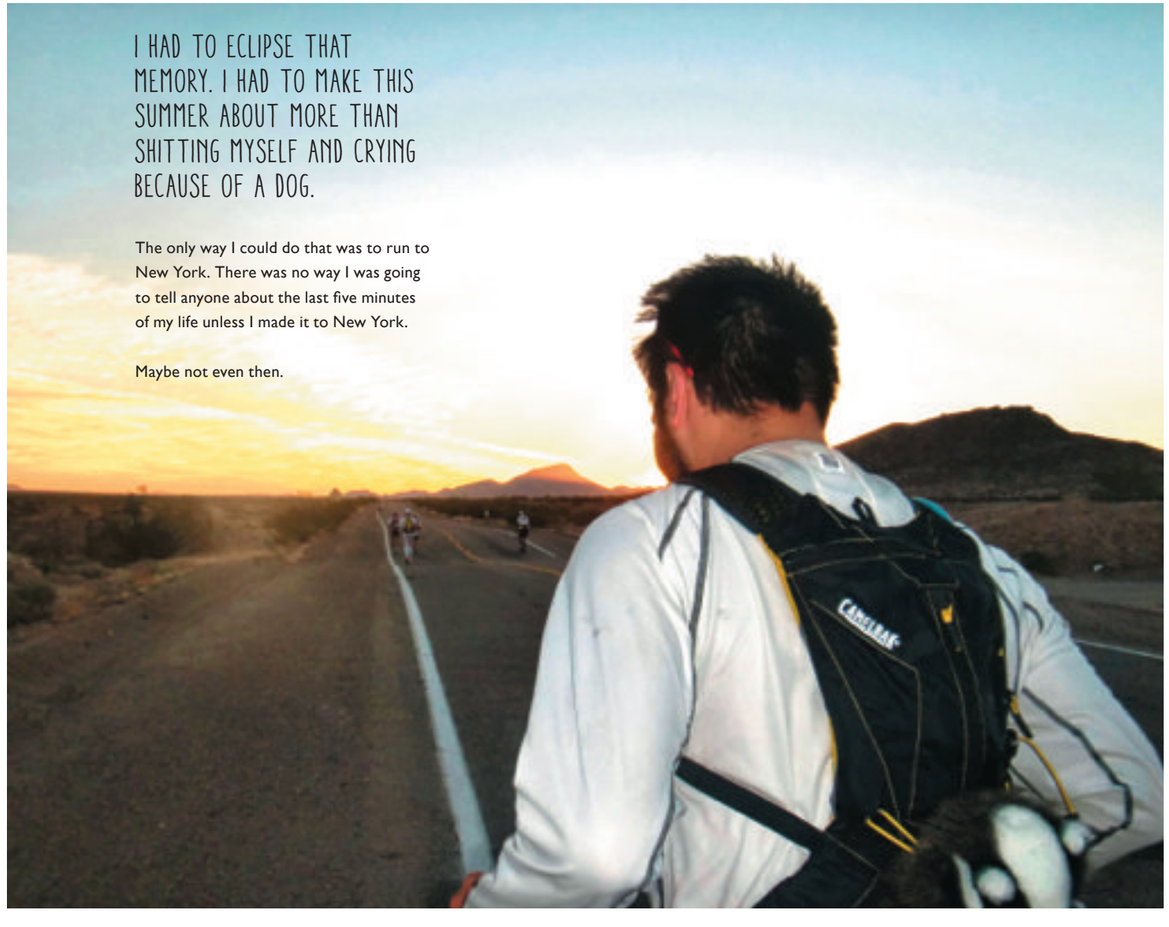
I HAD TO ECLIPSE THAT MEMORY. I HAD TO MAKE THIS SUMMER ABOUT MORE THAN SHITTING MYSELF AND CRYING BECAUSE OF A DOG.

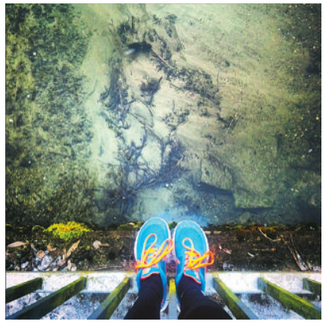
The only way I could do that was to run to New York. There was no way I was going to tell anyone about the last five minutes of my life unless I made it to New York.

Maybe not even then.

Excerpt from 'Running and Stuff', available now on Amazon and soon in paper format if you go and nag James at www.runningandstuff.com

James Adams likes running and eating. The order of preference is a bit chicken and egg.
@jamesradams






#FROMWHERELIZKERUNS

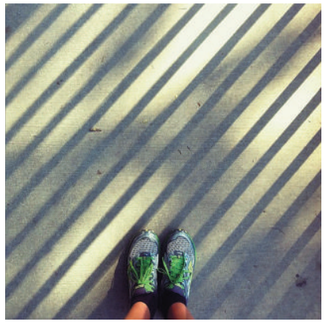
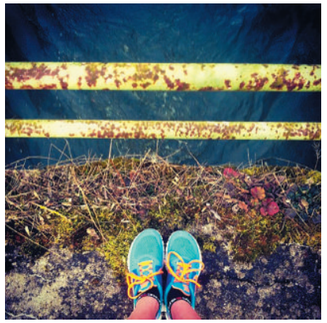













The goal behind Elizabeth Kellerer's series of pictures involves trying to have the same perspective in every picture. By doing this, the details become all important - what Liz is running on, what the weather conditions are, where in the world Liz is running. The viewer is challenged to extract as much as possible from the few details available. More of the series can be seen on Instagram by searching for #FromWhereLizKeRuns

Elizabeth Kellerer is a photographer, runner, (mountain)lover. @lizke www.lizke.de

KEITH

Words by Jonny Muir – Illustration by Serena Katt

Mr Hamflett was a tall, angular man. He was old and bald. I would never be as old as him. I would never be bald. He had the look of a runner: lean, lithe and long-limbed. If he could run a mile in under four minutes or a marathon in two-and-a-half hours, I would not have known. Teachers were one-dimensional beings, their lives beginning and ending at the school gates. He was a maths teacher who took us running and of whom I was scared. He was nothing greater than that.

Our nickname for Mr Hamflett was no more thoughtful or cruel than the man's first name, Keith. But rather than use our own voices when uttering "Keith", we spent childish hours honing a brittle, nasal tone, trying to imitate him, exaggerating his tones.

One of our regular training runs was a four-mile loop around the southern fringes of Bromsgrove. We would trundle up Rock Hill, skirt a housing estate, turn left at The Grasshopper pub, then jog down Buntsford Hill (where there were once fields but is now a Morrisons), before running through scary Charford and even scarier Pig Alley to school. On one occasion we had reached the bottom of Buntsford Hill when two or three of us started to walk. Whether this was borne of teenage idleness or genuine tiredness, I cannot recall. Keith was not far behind. This was not a spectacle he wished to witness.

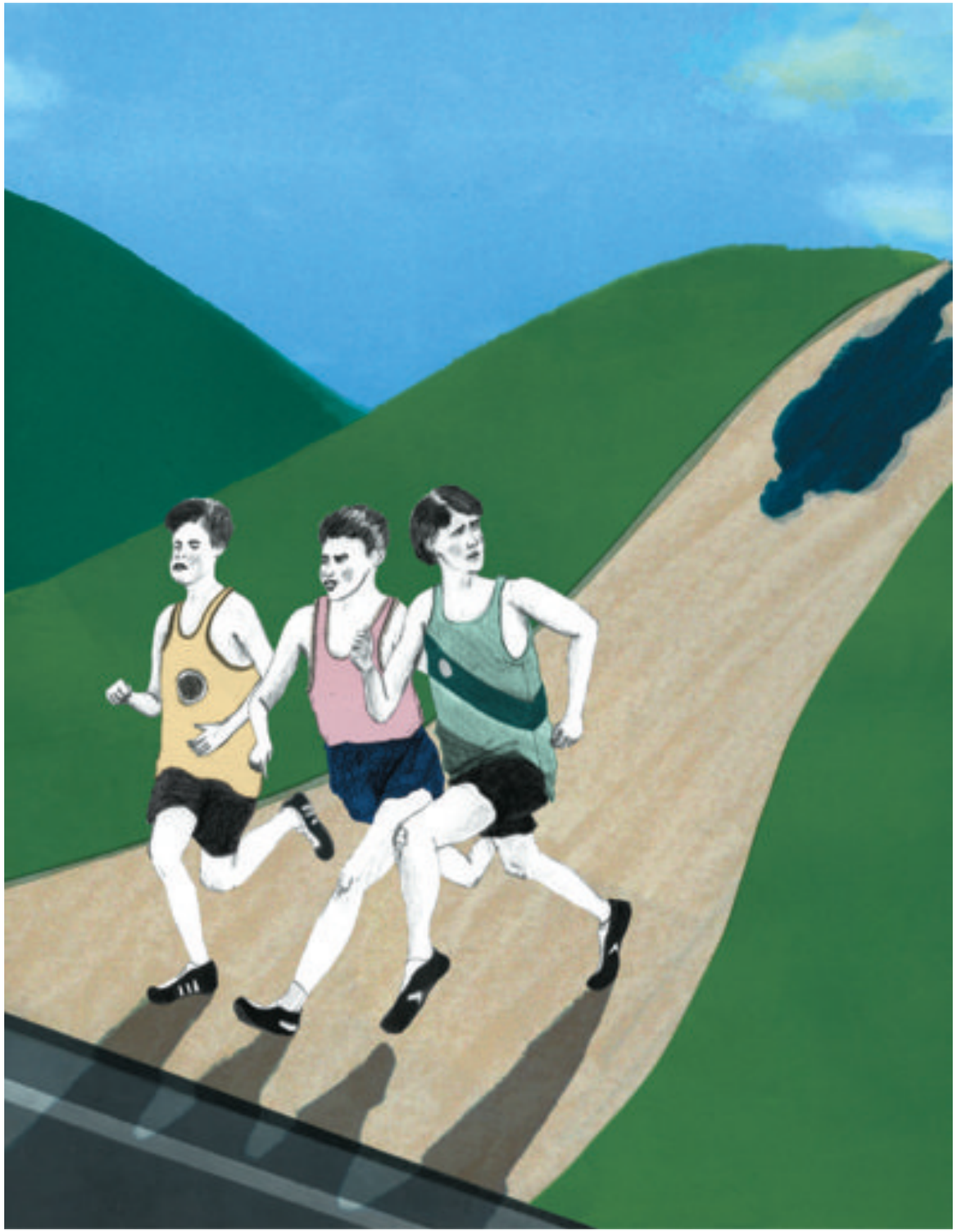
HE ROARED: "DON'T... STOP... RUNNING!" WE DID NOT LOOK BACK; WE DID NOT ARGUE.

Without hesitation we picked up our dragging feet and ran, not daring to stop until we had made it alive up Pig Alley, where drug dealers and bullies and teenage smokers hung out, and back to school. "Don't stop running!" Keith had gifted us a catchphrase to support our mimicry. "Don't stop running!" Between us, we must have repeated those words a thousand times. How we laughed at the man who gave us running.

Running club happens every Friday afternoon after lessons. Mr Dear and I tell students to arrive by 4pm, but we are lucky if we are running by 4.15pm. In winter it is nearly dark and we must usher the children into garish reflective tops. The club is open to all pupils, aged from 11 to 18. No sixth-former has ever come. We get about eight to 10 students on a good night. Sometimes we run off site: across the broad back of the Addington Hills to the viewpoint overlooking Croydon, along the Vanguard Way or up the wooded slopes of Croham Hurst, topped by a stunted tree resembling a sinister folded human. Generally, however, we stay on the school site. Such is the spread of abilities, this is the fallback, foolproof option.

The school's cross-country course is a one-mile loop, the focus of which is the dreaded Devil's Hill, a steep, slippery plunge that takes runners to the lowest point of the route, dramatically known as The End of the World. Girls (and maybe some boys) have been known to venture down Devil's Hill holding hands and screaming. Thereafter, it is an unremitting slog along a winding track through woods, under the shadow of the English and maths block, then up a final hill that passes the headmaster's house before a flat sprint to the finish outside the sports hall.

Every year, the entire school is given an afternoon off lessons for the School Cross Country. Pupils run; teachers marshal. The heaven of missing lessons is balanced by having to spend the afternoon muddy and miserable. There is no escape. The head of sport is scrupulous. If a pupil is off on the assigned day, by design or by accident, they will have to complete a timed run on another occasion. It should not be like



this. When many adults recall their time in education, the scar of the School Cross Country remains rough and raw.

THE RACE - LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN THE ONLY EXPOSURE CHILDREN WILL HAVE HAD TO RUNNING FOR A CONTINUOUS PERIOD - IS REDUCED TO A CONTRIVED EXERCISE OF HUMILIATION. THAT IS NOT THE ESSENCE OF RUNNING.

I was once jogging the cross-country course with a student when a deer flashed across the track before us. The boy was awestruck at the closeness of nature, of wildness. I wanted to tell him about running in the Rough Bounds of Knoydart and seeing a stag on the summit ridge of Ladhair Bheinn silhouetted against the sky. The animal had sniffed the air and fled with urgent grace, leading his hinds away faster than any descending fell runner. I did not say anything. I did not think the boy would understand.

Children discovering running find continuous running "hard". They have no concept of pace. They dart off, sprinting, chasing, laughing, only to be washed out and worn out minutes later. Saying "I told you so" does not work. Nor do they have a mechanism to manage discomfort. Why would they? Mine has been acquired over two decades of running. Over many years, experience and understanding of discomfort and pain becomes as significant as physical preparation. I know my limits; children are learning theirs.

Nevertheless, one Friday I resolve to make the "hard" a little easier. I tell the students they are to run for 10 minutes without stopping. They must pace themselves. They must not succumb to the insatiable desire to stop. They agree to the task willingly, although some believe it cannot be done. I made it easier on them by promising to avoid the cross-country course and its Devil's Hill connotations.

We jog down to a road that dissects two fields. To the left is the manicured West Pitch, the preserve of footballers; to the right is a rough, undulating area of grass known affectionately as The Dump. They start running. I start the watch. I position myself roughly in the middle of the fields so I can survey the runners. We have eight out today and they are soon straggled around the fields, running alone apart from two who stick together for moral support.

The ground is heavy. Not waterlogged, but a soggy enough for a little spray of water to rise as a foot hits the ground. Some look as if they are barely moving, but they are running. I am desperate for them to run for 10 minutes, for them to see that this is possible and for them then to aspire to greater things. I am consumed by the need for this to happen. Does this matter more to me than them? It is working, though. With me watching, they either do not want to stop or they are scared of the consequences of stopping. I no longer care what is motivating them. They simply need to know they can do this; it does not matter how. Once they can, they can do it again.

The 10 minutes is up. "Two minutes to go," I shout. "Just two minutes." No-one questions me. I see a boy in the distance slowing, stumbling to a halt.

And then, in the next breath, they come, involuntary words from my throat, words I had not formulated in my brain, words that filled me with alarm, words that sent me spinning hopelessly through time. The words poured forth, tumbling into an instinctively ordered torrent.

"Don't stop running!"

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