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## MARATHONS

Written by Emily Hourican

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At a party recently, the conversation turned to running (obviously we were just getting warmed up for the **real** business of pole dancing and snorting cocaine off platters held by dwarves dressed as Hercules, but this was still pre-watershed...). Everyone runs these days. We get fluorescent lycra for Christmas and birthday presents, and download performance-enhancing apps that count miles and calories while factoring in the wind resistance. Every highway and by-way is full of people loping along, some chatting easily, some puffing mightily.

Our host asked me how my running was going, and I told him well, and that I was thinking of doing a marathon later that year. I didn't really mean it, you understand. I was just filling a gap, boasting subtly that I was the kind of person who could run a marathon if they chose (this is nonsense by the way, I could no more run a marathon than I could make baked Alaska).

'Oh,' the woman beside me said, in a rather deflating way. 'Just by you saying that, I can guess your age to within – I bet – one year's accuracy.' She guessed, and she was right on the nose.

"Marathons at 40, extreme marathons at 50," she explained kindly. "My husband is preparing for his first polar marathon. He did a Sahara run last year. Friends of his are driving a dog sleigh across Antarctica for a week."

And we all stood and contemplated our mortality, just for a moment.

Because that is exactly what the marathons and the extreme survivalist stuff is – the dawning of a deathly realisation. It's not all forever. We are not immortal. This comes as far more of a surprise than you might expect. Our bodies start to let us down in tiny but telling ways – a stiffness in the mornings, a sprain that takes time to heal, a sudden awkward twist that leaves us gasping in pain. 'Oh hell,' we think. 'Tick tock... I'd better **do something** before I die.'

There may be charities involved, but trust me, all this mountain scaling and tundra trekking isn't about raising money for others. It is way bigger, and smaller, than that.

We are running away from ourselves, from the realities of our aging bodies. But that isn't all. This desire to confront nature, tackle the elements and pit ourselves against the planet, seems to grow slowly from about 30 onwards. Until then, we are so busy battling against ourselves, and wondering who those selves might be, that the natural world is as peripheral psychologically as it is physically to most of our lives.

And then we begin to realise that we are going to live and die in relative comfort, without ever really fighting for survival, or building empires, or discovering uncharted lands. And suddenly that seems like a shame, a source of disappointment rather than relief.

We realise that those bits of the brain that used to go towards assessing the dangers in our immediate environment, making camp in adverse conditions and sourcing food and water in hostile terrain, now only get an outing when we play **Assassin's Creed** on X-Box, or run out of petrol on the M50. And so the urge to Get Out There, to face down nature, gradually steals up on us.

Please don't think I'm being gloomy about all of this – I'm not. I think its brilliant that we should get a little nudge while there is still plenty of time, and that we should recognise it for what it is and plan trips with huskies and the like. So much better than buying a Porsche and chatting up interns. Or pushing our kids to become Prima ballerinas just because we never did. After all, one has to do **something**.

The desire to be really stretched, forced to confront the limits of our endurance and find out where those are, to make a paper boat of our comfort zone and set it to sail on raging seas, is a heartening one, one that speaks of a determination not to go gentle into that good night.

I think there is something else behind it as well, and that is the desire to find out more, even something tiny, about our world before we depart it. Its not just 'can I run 155 miles in the baking Saharan heat and not be air-lifted out?' – although that is a very valid question. It is also, 'what is at the edges of the world?'

In doing so, we may learn more about chafing and heat stroke than we every wished, but with that, we may also get a glimpse of the real world, the one that lives still beneath the veneer of civilisation we have constructed. The one that could shrug us all off without missing a beat. We may also come face to face without our purest, most primitive selves.

And then we get to come home and boast about it at parties.

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