

Alexandra Heminsley

**RUNNING**

**LIKE A GIRL**

'If you've ever wept, "WHY DO I WANT  
TO RUN?", your answer is here.'

**CAITLIN MORAN**

## **Contents**

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Alexandra Heminsley

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue

Part 1

Chapter One: Not Born to Run

Chapter Two: Learning to Run

Chapter Three: Wicking Fabric and How to Style It Out

Chapter Four: We are Family

Chapter Five: Injury

Chapter Six: The London Marathon

Chapter Seven: The London Marathon. Again

Chapter Eight: A Runner for Life?

Chapter Nine: Runner's High

Chapter Ten: The Right to Run

Chapter Eleven: The Finish Line

Part 2

Chapter Twelve: The Women in Whose Tracks We Run

Chapter Thirteen: Injury and You

Chapter Fourteen: Getting your Kicks

Chapter Fifteen: Get Involved

Chapter Sixteen: The Perfect Running Style

Chapter Seventeen: The Big One: Everything you Wanted  
to Know about a Marathon but were too Afraid to Ask

Chapter Eighteen: The Magical Secret

Acknowledgements

Read on

Copyright

## About the Book

Alexandra Heminsley had high hopes: the arse of an athlete, the waist of a supermodel, the speed of a gazelle. Defeated by gyms and bored of yoga, she decided to run.

Her first attempt did not end well.

Six years later, she has run five marathons in two continents.

But, as her dad says, you run with your head as much as with your legs. So, while this is a book about running, it's not just about running.

You could say it's about ambition (yes, getting out of bed on a rainy Sunday morning counts), relationships (including talking to the intimidating staff in the trainer shop), as well as your body (your boobs don't *have* to wobble when you run). But it's also about realizing that you can do more than you ever thought possible.

Very funny, very honest and very emotional, whether you're in serious training or thinking about running for the bus, this is a book for anyone who (after wine and crisps for supper a few too many times) thinks they might... just might... like to run like a girl.

## About the Author

Alexandra Heminsley is a journalist, broadcaster and ghostwriter. She lives in Brighton.

*By the same author*

*Ex and the City: You're Nobody 'Til Somebody Dumps You*

# Running Like a Girl

Alexandra Heminsley



HUTCHINSON  
LONDON

For my father, who taught me to put one foot in front of the  
other.

For my brother, who has kept me going more times than he  
can imagine.

And for David, who brought me sunshine.

## Prologue

THE SECRET THAT all runners keep is that they don't do it for their bodies, but for their minds. Slim legs can get boring, but a clear mind never does. The tight glutes, the xylophone abs, the satisfaction of knowing you can have an extra doughnut in front of the telly: these are not the point of running, but the by-product. The real gold at the end of the rainbow is grasping that you can leave the house almost trembling with trepidation about what lies ahead, and that if you can just keep yourself going, a few minutes, a few lamp-posts, a few kilometres at a time, you will be improving not just your running, but how you live your life.

The moments of anger or desolation that runners experience at desperate points of a lengthy run are basic physiological reactions to the situation. But once you have accepted what they are then you have learned to conquer them, and you will begin to believe anything is possible. A good run when you least want to leave the house has a magical ability to unravel a knotty problem that has been vexing you for days, without you really understanding how. Or it can prompt a depth of emotion you never dreamt you were capable of.

At the end of September last year I went to the cinema in London to watch Ryan Gosling in *Drive*. It's great, I recommend it, but remember: I saw him first. It is hard for me to be distracted when I am in the beam of The Gosling, so when my phone went as I entered the cinema I answered only because it was my sister's due date for her first baby and I could see that it was my mother calling. But instead of being told that my sister had been admitted to hospital, I

was told that her husband, a healthy, active 35-year-old, was lying on a ward. His heart rate was dangerously elevated and no one knew why. My mother told me to go into the film as there was nothing any of us could do until he had seen a specialist, but asked me to keep my mobile on in case my sister needed me. I entered the cinema in a semi-trance, my blood icy in my veins.

I sat with my phone in my hand, hypnotised by Gosling, yet aware of a constant ticker tape of anxiety scrolling across my mind. What was happening in the hospital a few miles away? I didn't understand. I texted my father throughout the film, checking to see if there were any updates: no news yet. I left the cinema and telephoned St George's Hospital. I knew that the situation was not good when I was put directly through to my sister within seconds. She was in tears and asked me to come immediately.

What followed was one of the most extraordinary forty-eight hours of all of our lives. I met my sister, headed home, made her some toast and tea, helped her in and out of the bath, and put her to bed. There was no sign of their baby, but nor was there any sign of her husband, who remained attached to myriad mysterious hospital wires. The next morning I accompanied my sister to the midwife, and then to the hospital to see her husband. I looked away when he told her that he was going into emergency heart surgery in a matter of hours. I held my breath when I heard him ask the surgeon what the alternative was. I did not breathe out when the reply came. 'There is none. Your condition is very rare, and fatal if untreated.'

My sister was advised to go home and rest while the surgery took place, and that the procedure would take two to three hours. Resting was easier said than done; it took us ten minutes to get her upstairs, wracked as she was with sobs of despair. I went downstairs and made three dishes of lasagne, wishing I had my trainers. I was still wearing the same outfit I'd left for the cinema in the previous day.

Four hours later we had heard nothing. My sister sat at the kitchen table and pressed 'redial' for thirty minutes. Eventually we were told we could go and visit. Amazingly her husband was fine, his condition entirely cured by pioneering keyhole surgery. The next morning my sister went into labour and had a beautiful, healthy baby boy: Louis.

A week later I ran the Royal Parks Half Marathon in London. There had been a point when I wondered if I'd be able to make it at all, but in the end it seemed like the only sensible thing to do. The previous week had been spent in a flurry of emails and phone calls, recounting the story of the extraordinary turn of events again and again. I visited the family, I visited my friends, I visited everyone I loved and could reach. I wanted to hug them all. And at every visit I told the story over and over until it was ragged, worn away by retelling, until it started to seem like a plotline from a soap opera I was summarising for a fellow viewer on Twitter. It was almost as if it hadn't happened to me.

I was nervous the morning of the run, as I always am when I go to a big public event alone. Had I forgotten something? Who would get me home to Brighton if I fell? Would this finally be the race where I wet myself in front of a crowd of onlookers? The usual worries. But, race aside, I felt happy and relaxed after a week in the company of those I loved, digesting the dramatic but ultimately joyous news.

As I crossed the starting line I felt a little emotional at how beautiful London looked that day. It had been a bizarre year for weather, and while there had been rain that morning, there was now a gorgeously crisp autumn sky and the leaves in Hyde Park were exquisite. I felt a little lump in my throat as we left the park and headed out along the Mall, then down along the river. We crossed at Waterloo Bridge and began to run back. That was when it happened. The tears.

Initially I thought it was just a tiny eye leak, the kind you might get at a moving political speech, a great novel or the last half-hour of *Children in Need*. You know, if you've had the right amount of whisky and some good company. A moment in passing. But I was wrong. The tears that could initially be disguised as eyes-streaming-from-the-cold soon turned into heaving sobs.

The first one appeared as a sort of half-gulp, half-yelp. The second one was an identifiable gasp. Then, five miles into a half marathon, I was off – proper full-blown crying. At first I didn't know what was wrong with me: I simply wasn't sad, in fact I was very happy. The news was all good, wasn't it? Yet it seemed that after almost a fortnight of coping, my body and mind suddenly decided to unburden at mile five, in the anonymity of the crowd. Only I wasn't anonymous; I was wearing a top bearing my nickname, HEMMO, in eight-inch letters. But by the time I had realised this, a thousand feelings per second had started to course through me, as if I were some sort of magical emotion-kaleidoscope. Every other second came a fresh sensation I hadn't let myself feel in front of my sister, the surgeons or anyone in the hospital. It was a tidal wave of tears.

Before I knew it my sobs were almost uncontrollable, to the point where the steady rhythm of my feet on the pavement had become the only thing stopping me from losing it altogether. I don't know how I managed to keep running, yet it was all that I could do. The memories of the previous ten days flashed before me: my hand round my mobile in that dark cinema as I waited for news, my sister's hand as she signed the consent form for her husband's surgery, my brother-in-law's hand as he stroked her bump. The smell of the antiseptic in the hospital, the smell of the food I made while my sister slept, the smell of my newborn nephew's head. Flashes of those conversations I had been having for days on end, until they lost all meaning to me, flooded back into my consciousness: 'What, he could have

died?’ ‘What, the baby was born the next day?’ ‘What, you’re still going to run at the weekend?’

Of course I still ran, because it was only through running that I was able to process how traumatic those few days had been. Except, of course, the spectators along the route that day didn’t know the reason for my sobs. They just saw a runner in distress and cheered me on. Which, if I am honest, only made things worse. Because with every step my heart seemed to be swelling – expanding to make room for this newly realised love I felt for my brother-in-law, my new nephew and the friends that had supported us all. There simply wasn’t space to love the sweet faces of the children who had come out to support a dad or a sibling and found themselves cheering me along too. Was there? So their kindness was converted into more grinning tears, as I gulped and tried to smile back and explain: ‘Oh no, don’t worry, I’m fine! It’s just that . . .’ and I was past them.

‘WELL DONE, HEMMO,’ they shrieked at my back. And that just made me cry more.

*Calm down, you’re embarrassing yourself now, you need to get your heart rate down if you’re going to carry on,* I told myself, which only prompted further tears at the very thought of hearts. *Oh hearts! Hearts are so amazing!* Once again I was lost in emotion at the wonder of life itself.

I don’t remember the last couple of miles, until I reached the final straight. I saw the finish line and suddenly felt a strength I didn’t know I had. Admittedly I had not run exceptionally fast, given my busy schedule of weeping, but suddenly I felt more powerful than ever before. My brother-in-law had survived. My sister had survived. We had all survived. So I sprinted. I felt myself speed up, until I could see that I was overtaking the people around me. I left them behind, running faster than I ever had. Slowly I felt my face begin to tingle, then my hands. As I came within metres of the finish line I wondered if I was going to make it at all. But I did, straight into the arms of a St John’s Ambulance worker

who had seen me coming. He tilted my head forward over my knees to steady my breathing, which was now hysterical. I thanked him through my weird gulpy gasps, and with relief took the water he gave me. Moments later my brother appeared and bought me a sausage in a bun. It was the best sausage in a bun I have ever known, and they are *always* good. On the train home I emailed my girlfriends the story of what had happened, expecting to be told I was quite mad. But they understood. They understood it all.

That day in October was the day that taught me most about why I run: once you've experienced the delicious realisation that you can carry on when you are quite sure you are about to die of tears in a crowd of thousands, you have taught yourself a skill that is applicable to all of life. It turns out that to survive, you just have to keep going.

# PART 1

'It's the most natural thing in the world. We were born to run.'

'You just put on your trainers and head out the door, that's the beauty of it.'

'It's just you, the road and your thoughts.'

These are the things that people say about running. These are lies.

Running is awful. It feels unnatural, unnecessary, painful. It can hijack you with breathlessness, cripple you with panic and overwhelm you with self-consciousness. It isn't a warm fire or a deep sofa or a cup of tea and a smile. It is cold and hard and unforgiving. It feels more difficult the better you get. It hurts your head and it hurts your toes.

But it is also the pleasure of being outside on a sunny day, feeling the prickle of the sun on your skin. It is the delight of feeling your body temperature rise despite the crisp winter breeze against your face. It is feeling blood rush around every part of your body and coming home to a welcoming bath and a delicious curry, your skin still glowing an hour later.

And, as I have learned, it is also an honour, a privilege and a gift.

So this part of the book isn't about trying to persuade you that you should run, but that you can. I was there, repulsed and intimidated by the beatific smiles and radiant smugness of the determinedly Sporty Types. For years running seemed a punishment to keep off the pounds - yet another way we were being told to keep off the pounds, to feel the burn, to pay for that half glass of white wine and four squares of chocolate. God forbid we might have a body that was less than beach ready!

I could remember how everything just felt more fun when I ran as a child but there didn't seem to be much to encourage me, a woman in her thirties, who'd spent several years forgetting supper on a Friday in place of a night out,

that it could be something for me. So, this book is the one I didn't have but would have liked to have read before I went on my first (disastrous) run. Something for those people who think they can't run for whatever reason. For the women who think they aren't slim enough to wear running kit or that it's not worth it if they don't want to complete an entire marathon, for the women who think that running around in circles is an idiotic way to spend the best part of an hour. For those women who don't yet trust that it really is a source of immeasurable pleasure, self-belief and unexpected companionship, rather than a necessary purgatory - that they might, just might, enjoy the confidence, the physical ease or the mental clarity that running brings.

Because it was in running that I discovered that the scope of our achievements is not determined by others, but by ourselves.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Not Born to Run

*'Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly'*

Robert F. Kennedy

THAT WAS IT, I was going to run round the block. I had high hopes: hopes of the arse of an athlete, the waist of a supermodel and the speed of a gazelle. Defeated by gyms, bored by sanctimonious yoga teachers and intimidated by glossy tennis clubs, I decided it was time to end a lifetime spent believing myself to exist on the outside of sport. I would return powerful and proud, the city still reeling at the sight of my grace and speed on the pavements of Kilburn. This is the story of my first run.

There was little else I could do to procrastinate. The washing-up was done, the ironing was pancake flat, the bookshelves dusted. Every possible worst-case scenario had been replayed in my head a million times, and it was clearly never going to rain. I had run out of excuses. I tied back my hair, grabbed a 500ml bottle of water, put my keys in the pocket of my tracksuit bottoms, and stood at the front door. This was it. I was going for a run.

I opened the front door and walked down the three steps to the pavement. What was I supposed to do next? Perhaps some stretching? I held on to a lamp-post and pulled my foot up behind me, trying to stretch the front of my thigh. I

did the same thing with the other leg and looked around anxiously. My heart was beating too fast already. What if someone could tell it was my first run? Would they be able to see that I was doing it wrong?

Running. It was just running, I told myself. I set off down the road, trying to look to the Saturday passers-by as if this were something as normal to me as taking the bins out. But that road was a long road. It was the grouting between the urban delights of Kilburn High Road and the chic coffee shops of Queen's Park. As I headed towards the park, the houses became progressively more glamorous and well groomed. I, however, did not.

I was halfway down the road when I had to stop. There was an awful juddering as the whole world moved up and down on account of my lumbering limbs: thud, thud, thud as my feet hit the ground, sending shockwaves through both my body and the pavement. Within seconds - not even minutes - my face had turned puce with intense heat and my chest was heaving. I could see the crossroads, but to my ragged humiliation I could not make it that far. I was not just out of breath, I was actually having to swallow down panic to keep myself moving at all.

I walked for the length of the next song on my playlist. The indignity of admitting I could no longer run seemed slightly less than that of the physical wreck I would become if I continued to run. Eventually I made it to the park and tried to run for the length of the next song. I could not manage even that and I ended up walking past the field of children playing football at the centre of the park. Each of them seemed to be darting around effortlessly, continually in motion, while every part of my body seemed to be seizing up.

The wobble of my thighs, the quake of my arse, the ridiculous jiggle of my boobs, they seemed to mock me as the Saturday dads stared in horror from the playground. Every time my feet struck the tarmac I was convinced my

ankle would twist, and every time I looked down to check I was confronted with the expanse of my thigh looming towards me. It felt as if my physical self was entirely disconnected from everything my intellectual or emotional self was trying to tell it. *Calm down, putting in the effort is the main thing*, was merely met with, *Yeah right, because putting yourself in this much pain is a great idea*. Which in turn stole away any possibility of calming down with the result that my heart rate started rising from fear once again.

As I reached the far end of the park and turned to head back, the pounding of my heart and then the slow fire in my lungs convinced me of that one immovable fact: I would never make it home.

Eventually, after several more starts and stops and a total avoidance of eye contact with every single person I passed, I got home. I rewarded myself handsomely with a phenomenal amount of food and drink at the party that night, blithely telling everyone that I'd been for a huge run that morning. When I woke up the next morning I felt as if I had been run over by a truck. A big truck with huge, grooved tyres. Oh, this was an unacceptable way to make oneself feel, I declared. I must have overtrained. Later I looked up how far I had run: it was one mile.

It was another three months before I tried to run again.

I don't remember making the decision that I couldn't run; it was simply one of those things that made me *me*, like my love of cheese, or my distaste for men in polo necks.

But my certainty that I couldn't run was absolute, my envy profound of those who could and my admiration for my flatmate boundless. She would appear at the front door, glowing from one of her regular routes around Regent's Park or Hampstead Heath, and I would welcome her enthusiastically. We'd chat about what she'd seen, her leaning at the kitchen counter sipping a glass of water, me

on the sofa with my laptop propped on my knees like a windy baby.

'I wish I could run.' There is a certain comfort in saying it aloud. 'It looks like so much fun,' I'd sigh as she took off her trainers. I felt a twinge of sadness knowing that it was too late for me to start. I would reach for the TV remote with resignation.

As I watched my flatmate's running kit circulating hypnotically in the washing machine, I never questioned the casual lunacy of my conviction that I 'couldn't run'. It seems to have been cumulative, something that I let happen to me, a state of affairs I succumbed to without question.

I remember being six or seven, and running being what I could barely wait to do during break time at school. And I remember being thirty, having total confidence that running was utterly beyond me.

Somehow, during the years in between, I forgot the sensation of reading or being read to in infant class, and beginning to feel that familiar itch in my legs. I would look up at the clock, back at the teacher and out of the window. Soon. Then, the very second the bell went, we would grab our coats and head outside to play whatever game we could think of, just as long as it meant running around for a bit. We didn't call it running at that age, because running was how we did everything, mittens trailing from our sleeves and plaits whipping at our cheeks. We were just children doing our thing, and our thing was always more fun when done at speed. We ran and we laughed. They were one and the same.

As a ten-year-old I stood daydreaming at the start of the 400-metres circuit. I watched the warm summer sun shine through the pinprick holes in my navy blue Aertex shirt, noticing how it had browned both my arms and the grass of the track. I would merrily run round it for as long as I could, sometimes straight across the middle if I fancied a change,

until we were called back to lessons or until someone else needed the track.

Twenty years later I was completely at ease with my status as someone who lived on the outside of sport. It was as if I had never run. It never occurred to me that I could, that all I had to do was to leave the house. I wasn't a runner and that was that. Somehow I had lost sight of the fact that not being a runner and not being able to run were not one and the same.

I wasn't the sporty type, it was as simple as that. I was a curvy girl with little or no competitive spirit. I rarely made connection between bat and ball during games at school, and neglected my body almost entirely for three years at university. Perhaps I broke into a run that time I was pushing my friend Clare down Cotham Hill in a shopping trolley, and I know I danced on a podium a few times, but they were definitely the sum of my collegiate athletic endeavours.

Then I moved to London and joined the eternal treadmill of private gym membership. Each time I looked round a new venue I told myself that this would be the one. This would be the gym that would make me fall in love with exercise. But they never did. Once the oleaginous buzz of viewing the facilities, being given my workout profile and trying the steam room for the first time was over, the magic quickly faded and I returned to fleeting, guilty glimpses at my bank statement as I realised each visit was costing me more and more.

Back then I didn't know that the gym was just sticky methadone to the heroin of running outdoors. How could pounding along on the running machine, going nowhere in front of a wall of relentless rolling news, compare to the freedom of running along the seafront, looking up at a seagull hovering over a scrap of food on the path and realising that for a moment you were neck and neck? But still I continued. Next came the (Madonna-influenced) yoga phase. Hours of bending and sweating in a room full of

freelance web designers and stressed-out fashion editors. Then came pilates, and even a flirtation with meditation.

Finally, after a summer of heartache, followed by almost crippling depression, came the walking phase. After a hectic routine of lying under my coffee table weeping, I had reached a point where I just had to get outside and see daylight. I wanted to feel the breath of warm air on my skin, I yearned to feel my blood actually circulate round my body again, and I needed to do it with a view that was not just that of a prefab ceiling tile or a yogi's tatty three-week-old pedicure. Half-deranged by weeks of erratic sleeping - nights spent enervated and panicky followed by sluggish, heavy-limbed days - I decided in desperation that physically exhausting myself might make the nights seem a little more welcoming. I longed to long for my bed, instead of seeing it as a battleground for a never-ending war against my own demons. I yearned to yearn to go and lie down at the end of the day, legs aching from use rather than the frantic jiggling they did under my desk for hours on end.

One day I just upped and left the house, and didn't return until nearly dusk. Thus began my walking phase. I would walk for hours, all over the routes that my now ex-flatmate had covered the year before. Hampstead Heath, Regent's Park, Hyde Park. I would leave the house on a Sunday morning and not return for three or four hours. Often I could barely remember the time I had spent away, as if the meditative repetition of my strides had somehow hypnotised me. I would begin firey, anxious to get away from the dirty urban streets, the dawdling pedestrians, the local shops whose owners had seen me tear-stained and bedraggled over my summer of bad eating. Then, as the parks opened up before me, I would feel my spirits lift. I would romp around the Heath, deliberately choosing to get lost a while in a wooded area I didn't recognise. I would stroll through rose gardens wondering if I would ever know

the stories behind the blooms' names. A tiny part of the me I thought I had lost started to wriggle back to the surface.

I would arrive home exhausted but noticeably lighter of spirit. My head felt as if someone had popped in and run a duster around it. I formed a truce with my bed, seeing it as a place for rest anew. I cherished the time I spent off grid, uncontactable and alone. The coils that had spent endless nights tightening in my mind would loosen a little; my imagination felt itself inclined to wander towards the positive rather than the self-focused disaster movie scenarios it had recently felt so devoted to. I remain convinced that those walks in the summer of 2006 saved me. Not just because they restored my ability to sleep, but because they delivered me that first tiny germ of physical confidence. If I could walk for four hours what might happen if I sped up . . . and then sped up even more? My heart had begun to believe that anything was possible, and my head had begun to plan for it. Maybe even . . . a run.

So it was this spirit of optimism that inspired that first run to Queen's Park a year later. If my heart could survive the pummelling it had taken, my legs must surely have more to give. I figured that if I'd been taking three-hour walks regularly for about a year, I *might* be ready for a run. My preparations were extensive: first there were two weeks of thinking about it. What would it feel like? Would I fall over? How would I get home if it were too much? I was filled with positivity and enthusiasm. Hours were spent checking out potential new fitness clothes for the 'new me'. I panicked, then became exhilarated, then put it off for a couple more days. Thus continued the loop for a whole fortnight in the run-up to that unholy day.

When the morning of The Run came I woke up and immediately ate three slices of toast with honey, 'for energy'. Then I spent at least ninety minutes faffing around on iTunes, trying to compose a playlist of such magnitude that it would propel me round the park, no matter how