1

March 2016

In just the past month I'd thought of nine or ten ways I could do it. Sticking my head in the oven felt like it would leave the least amount of mess; using a knife would take some serious bottle, more than I felt I had; and while throwing myself in front of a train at Stratford would probably get the job done, the psychological impact on the driver and everyone on the platform was just too awful to think about, and not something I wanted to be responsible for.

I'd been living like a wounded animal for weeks, too hurt to move, begging to be put out of its misery. I longed to eat something I didn't know I was allergic to, to be stabbed in the street, to have an undiagnosed heart condition. But of all the versions of death I could dream up, the one I fantasized about the most was jumping from the room on the fourth storey, above the bar. I imagined standing on the ledge, staring down at a world I didn't understand, a world full of people I didn't feel any sort of kinship with. I imagined a sudden gust of wind, cold and hostile, slapping me across the face, before I took one last breath of dank, polluted London air and released myself, from the ledge and from my rotten, disintegrated life, feeling the briefest rush of terror and adrenaline course through me as I plunged head first towards the pavement.

. . . and then, just like that, it'd all be over. Dreamless sleep

forever and ever. No pain, no hate, no sadness. Abrupt, blissful nothingness.

But despite obsessing about death, allowing the image of falling through the air to get clearer and more visceral over time, the thought of killing myself was a desire, not an option. I honestly never thought I'd go through with it – at least, not until that morning.

My shift had ended early. Bethnal Green Road had been quiet, even for a weeknight, resulting in probably the most peaceful evening I'd seen at the Well and Bucket since I'd agreed to take over as manager eight months previously. It was typically a very busy haunt – located off the top of Brick Lane on the fashionable Shoreditch/Bethnal Green border, it was renowned for good food and good, interesting booze, and was tastefully decorated with dark wooden floors, a polished brass bar, and crumbling tiles from Britain's Regency era clinging desperately to the walls. It served as a landmark of sorts, a solid piece of London's social history, and it remained a popular choice with the hordes of young professionals and artisan-spirit purveyors of east London.

After over a decade spent slinging pints and mopping up vomit in Brighton's thriving but slightly mucky bar scene, I had been excited to be asked to oversee a venue with that much class and history. However, only a couple of months in, my initial enthusiasm had begun to fade, and my excitement about landing the 'dream job' was replaced by an intense, rotting feeling inside me that I didn't understand. Something was happening to me. Something was wrong. And what terrified me the most was that I didn't know how to fix it.

That night, after ushering out the last few stragglers, I cashed up and joined my staff for a post-shift drink, slightly earlier than usual. We congregated in our usual spot – on the

side of the bar nearest the tiled wall beneath three large Victorian portraits with human skulls superimposed over the faces. I sat there for hours, silently knocking back can after can of half-chilled Camden Hells, half-listening to the usual gossip about customers, friends and current flings, staring at the paintings. They had a macabre quality, and looking at them made me feel closer to death, in a way that was more comfortable than it should have been. I looked towards the ceiling, picturing my room on the fourth floor, and realized that I felt no sense of comfort in doing so.

My bosses hated the idea of me living above the pub, and for good reason. With no clear divide between my job and any sanctuary, I was constantly on high alert and spent most of my time off lying in bed, flinching at every sound that came from the floors below like a dog in a storm. My room was a truthful reflection of how I viewed myself – cold, bare and void of any charm or personality. Waking up in that room every day made me feel like the lowest of the low; lacking even the most basic self-respect to keep it habitable. My hygiene routine had run aground a few weeks previously, and slumping into bed without showering at the end of the night was now a regular thing. Looking into a mirror for longer than a second was starting to torment me, and running my tongue across my teeth felt like licking the felt on an old pub pool table. I was in poor shape, in every conceivable way. And I had never felt so alone.

I thought I had to avoid being found out at all costs and, whenever I felt this way, whenever my mind told me how shit I was, I buried it. I buried it in shallow holes, never deep enough to cover it up completely, so when the working day was over and I was by myself, the feelings re-emerged.

I'd always felt that there were two versions of 'Jake'. Version one is confident, engaged, talkative, has the guts to take

on just about anything; version two is quiet, unable to think straight and unsure of who he is. In my mind, V2 posed a constant threat to my more desirable self, V1. V2 was, in my eyes, the most pathetic individual that has ever lived. It's unsettling writing about myself like this – I'd never dream of being so brutal to another human being the way I sometimes am to myself.

I was ashamed of the second version of me, and I carried that shame around with me like a bag of rocks. Surrounded by what I saw to be relentlessly confident people *all* of the time, my lack of consistency was a source of intense embarrassment, and I used so much of my energy trying to hide it. Despite kind of recognizing that hating a side of me was a 'mind' issue, I never once considered that it could be described as a 'mental health' issue. I was convinced that what was going on inside my head was something specific to me, a personality malfunction that was mine to either rectify or ignore as I saw fit. The thought of seeking help from a doctor never even entered my mind. Doctors were for physical ailments – colds, flu, tummy bugs – not for helping with the feeling that there's a crap version of yourself that makes you sad and scared and which constantly threatens the person you want to be.

I sometimes wonder what I'd have done if I'd known I was dealing with depression. Would I have tried to get help earlier? Or would I have been afraid, resisted it, or just not known where to find it?

Night had turned into day, and after finally calling it a night with my staff, I locked the pub and climbed the stairs to my room on the fourth floor. As I lay on my bed, facing the ceiling, a fog swam through and occupied every corner of my mind as the dull London dawn seeped into my bedroom. I spent a few glazed-over moments just staring at the

end of the bed. The beer-stained shirt and jeans I'd peeled off lay there, limp and ugly, and I winced, knowing that despite that they were still my cleanest clothes and that I'd have to wear them again today.

Across the room was the window I smoked out of. I used to like sitting there at night, listening to the busy sounds of east London, out of view of everyone on the street below.

As I lay staring at it, sadness engulfing me like bonfire smoke, I realized this was it. The pain I felt was so deep I convinced myself it would be impossible to recover from it. I would never be happy again. In that moment, there was only one way I could see to end the pain.

I focused on the window so intently that everything around it faded to black, and I felt a chill run through my veins. It was over, I knew that. The chill turned into heat and shot so much adrenaline through me I thought I would throw up. In a bid to calm myself before I stood up, I took a breath and began counting down from ten.

Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . . six . . . five . . . four . . . *Mum* . . . three . . . *I want my mum* . . .

Somewhere in between unconscious survival instinct and the conscious understanding that my life hung in the balance, I saw her face. Without even thinking about it, I reached for my phone, opened my contacts and found her name: Mum.

Mum is small, like a Hobbit. She lives on a barge that she bought in the Netherlands after she and my dad split up when I was nineteen. She wears woolly socks and drinks hot blackcurrant tea from stained mugs. She has inquisitive blue-green eyes and the same button nose as me. She's named most of the ducks on the River Blackwater in Essex, something she wishes she didn't do because she gets upset when, say, 'Mark E. Duck' goes missing. She once came to my

primary school to teach us yoga, and she used to cheer louder than all the other mums at sports day. She meditates every day and burns incense without taking fire precautions. She makes the world's best roast vegetables. She loves watching football, going to gigs and smoking three roll-ups in the evening while she watches *Holby City*. Mum thinks dogs should be dogs and encourages hers, Reggie, to bark at passers-by from the barge wheelhouse. She had a vegetarian food business called Sun and Moon when we were kids and shouted at our childminder after finding out she'd been sneaking me and my brother, Sam, coffee and sausages. She has about a thousand DVDs but doesn't have a favourite film. She is a mother of three, and always made me, Sam and my sister, Frank, feel unconditionally wanted and loved, like we were the centre of her Earth.

'Hello, stinker,' she said. I could almost see her scrunching up her nose, a playful glint in her eye.

A pause. It felt as if my heart was breaking.

'Hi,' I said. Deep, rasping, broken.

'Jake?'

'. . .'

'Are you all right?'

Crying. Breaking. Shattering.

'I don't know what's going on,' I stuttered, my intonation patchy.

Silence.

'I'm really worried . . . I'm going to hurt myself.' I was sobbing.

It's become very common for people to suggest that you 'talk to someone' if you're struggling with your mental health. While this is good advice, sadly it's not always that easy. The pressure to be clear about what's going on in your head and to communicate your pain so that someone else understands

is one of the reasons so many people struggle to open up. What you are feeling is disjointed and jarring and nothing makes sense. You feel that no one else could possibly understand, and so you put it off, assuming that if you can't be understood, you can't be helped. What I learned in that moment on the phone with my mum is that opening a door and sharing your mind with another person isn't about seeking answers, it's about no longer being alone in your pain. Letting my mum in somehow made the load lighter. Her love and concern forced their way through the fog, squeezing and weaving, creating a chink of light bright enough for me to see what it was I was considering and to question whether it really was the answer. No doubt about it – that phone call saved my life.

I spent maybe twenty minutes on the phone to my mum, crying mostly, being silent in between. Before she hung up, she gave me a couple of jobs. Number one was to let my employers know what I'd told her. The anxieties I'd been having about being unfit for the role I'd been given, being unable to cope with the stress of management, of there being a hundred other people waiting in line to jump in and do my job, and do it better than me, made the prospect of talking to my employers Mike and Lee – the very people who might confirm that all these things were true – seem a difficult and unnerving assignment. But when I picked up the phone and called Lee, I was met with nothing but genuine concern. It was as if I'd taken the lid off something when I called Mum and it felt a bit easier now to pour myself out. Even though I felt my ability to think clearly and to make decisions was at absolute nil, I still wanted to work. If I left, I would just have more time to obsess about how I was feeling. We decided to reduce my hours to thirty a week, so that day I left the pub by midday, which meant I could tackle the second job Mum

had given me – to go and see a doctor. Again, this wasn't something I had previously considered an option, and as a result I had mixed feelings about it – what's the point, what can they do, isn't it just going to be a waste of everyone's time?

Calling the surgery would also mean a hat trick of soul-baring phone conversations before lunch, and that in itself was deeply unsettling. When I called, the receptionist asked me why I needed to see the doctor and, instantly, without pause, the words broke free.

'I think I want to kill myself.'

When I heard those words leave my mouth I felt like I'd revealed a secret I'd sworn never to tell. Fear and panic shot down my arms, my stomach turned over and the blood drained from my face. Saying it had made me think about how close I'd come to dying that morning, and the realization made my skin itch. The breath was knocked out of me by a tidal wave of guilt. Tuesday, 29 March 2016. It could have been a day that everyone who loved me might never recover from, forever tormenting themselves by wondering if they could have done more, why they hadn't noticed something was wrong. I felt sick with shame.

I entered the GP's surgery that afternoon on autopilot. I had no idea what I was going to say, or what would come of the appointment, but it felt right to be doing something, like it was necessary. The doctor sat me down rather than asking me to take a seat and sat next to me, on the same side of the desk. I was numb, a big ball of nothing. He asked what he could do for me and I looked straight into his eyes. They were kind, but in them I could see that he wasn't really sure what to do with me. He looked about my age and was wearing a crisply ironed shirt and trousers pulled tight and unflatteringly around his thighs. After a few moments of

awkward silence I started talking, and before I knew it I couldn't stop:

'I nearly killed myself this morning, I think I'm going mad. I'm overwhelmed all the time, I don't even know who I am. I can't remember what feeling happy is like. I've struggled with confidence and low self-esteem for years; I literally hate everything about myself. Sometimes I can pretend to be a different version of me, and people really like him, but I can't do that all the time. I hide everything. I'm deeply insecure. I make people smile because their face is the only thing that can lift me out of the darkness for a moment. I get anxious socially. I can't do my job. I don't sleep properly. I drink every day and take drugs all the time. I don't belong in this world, I'm not like everyone else here. I think I might be crazy. There's this fog inside me and it saturates everything. I can't think straight, I can't articulate myself.'

He listened intently to me tripping over the muddle of words gushing out of me.

It was like with every sentence I was confessing absolute truth, and while it was unbearably uncomfortable and nauseating, it felt like I was doing the right thing. When I finally came up for air something washed over me, encouraging me to fill my lungs and let my jaw unclench. Calmness. Relief. For a few moments, the doctor stared back at me.

After a long pause he asked me a question, the most important question I'd ever been asked:

'Do you actually want to die, Jake, or do you not want to feel like this anymore?'

It was in that doctor's office that I realized I'd become convinced that suicide was what I had to do to free myself of such intense mental pain. I'd not even considered that the two things could be separated. Understanding the distinction between wanting my pain to be over and wanting my

life to be over helped me achieve some clarity when my thoughts were at their murkiest, and over the following weeks I kept his question in my mind as I attempted to piece myself back together. I had refused the GP's suggestion that I take a course of antidepressants. I wasn't entirely sure why, but I did. Somehow, I felt that medicating myself wouldn't get to the crux of what was wrong with me. Like the drugs might mask what was really going on. I did agree that seeing a therapist was probably a good idea, so I was given the number of a Cognitive Behavioural Therapist named Irene.

I saw Irene in her eleventh-floor office, far away from the crowded streets nestled below, maybe twice a week for three weeks. I don't remember much of the conversations we had, I only remember that at the time I felt like I was doing something important and necessary by visiting her, and I know that Irene helped change my perspective pretty quickly. She helped me see that my behaviours were simply human behaviours and that what I was doing was exactly what 'we' do in times of trauma. It was interesting to discuss these things, and Irene's insight was often very illuminating. But it didn't do much for how I felt inside. Despite feeling that I now had some support from those around me, I continued to feel withdrawn, lost and jaded, and I was still no closer to 'fixing' the problem.

Depression isn't just misery, it's agony, and carrying it is as exhausting as anything I've ever had to do. A week after that morning where things almost came to a head, it became apparent that I was too ill to work. With a heavy heart and an acute sense of failure, I resigned from my position at the Well and Bucket and ran home.

2

In quitting my job, I might have fled the stress of work, but the weight of what I'd been through was still bearing heavily down on me. I couldn't physically escape it because it wasn't a place or a person or a situation, it was something going on inside me, and in order to escape myself I was going to have to do better than just change postcodes. Being in my home town of Maldon, Essex, felt good, though. The familiarity calmed me. I knew the distinctive smell of mud on the quay when the tide's out; how the tree outside All Saints Church explodes with pink blossom in the spring; how to spot the faint outline of the infamous 'Welcome to Malden' graffiti on the roof of Iceland (the perpetrator calculatingly misspelled 'Maldon' – a sure sign he was from the town and knew just how much it would piss the locals off). Something about being there made me feel close to being reset. It could be something in the estuary air, or how the church bells chime high and musical and carry throughout the town, or seeing the same old faces in the high street – people I've never spoken to but have watched slowly age over time. Maldon is also home to both my parents, both grandmothers, one of my grandads, my uncle, aunt and two of my cousins, so being there feels like I'm being hugged by my entire family. At this point in my life, it's fair to say I was in need of a hug.

My family was a tight unit when I was growing up. My parents had me and my brother, Sam, when they were very young, and when my sister, Frank, came on the scene in 1999 I was already thirteen and becoming my own person. I guess

it would make for a good story to say that life was a struggle from the get-go, that the way I felt later in life was the result of a tormented youth and a dysfunctional family, but the truth is I really enjoyed my childhood.

My fondest memories are almost all from the times we spent outdoors as a family. Bundling up in hats, gloves and big, comfy jumpers and driving out to the woods, where Sam and I would chop down bracken and hurtle deep into the trees to 'explore' and 'find clues'. It's the perfect environment to let a kid's curiosity and imagination run wild, opening the door to a world of discovery, freedom and adventure. I held on to those feelings, even after our walks became less frequent as we got older, but I think the escape from reality that nature has always brought me stems from those walks we used to take.

I was proud of my 'outdoorsy' family, even more so when I began to notice how 'indoorsy' a lot of my other friends' families seemed to be – lots of dads in ties, with Sky dishes and microwave dinners; it was a far cry from being brought up by two young hippies. Even after my folks split up when I was nineteen, we all remained close. After selling the family home, Dad got himself a flat above a tanning salon in Maldon High Street, where Sam and I lived until we left home, while Mum went over to the Netherlands, bought herself the barge and brought it back to the quay on the Blackwater estuary, and she's been living in it there with Frank ever since. Maldon's steadily grown into a busy town over the years, and despite being moored near the bustling promenade park ('the prom', as it's known to the locals), Mum's boat *Blackbird* is as peaceful a home as you're likely to find. With Frank at university and Dad having moved into a smaller place, I decided it would be there, with Mum, that I'd go to get better.

I quickly became the key feature in Mum's living room – a fifteen-by-twelve-foot cabin with dark wooden panelling on the walls, a small log burner on the far wall, opposite the comfiest battered red sofa in the world, and a colourful rug, acquired on one of Mum's many trips to India, covering the entire floor. Hanging on the walls and windowsills are a number of framed pictures and trinkets, including a few Buddhist monuments and an old Bob Dylan fly poster. It's a far cry from the squalid, desolate walls in my room in Shoreditch. Next to the TV hangs a sign that reads, 'What would Elvis do?' – kind of apt, I thought, as I lay there for days on end, comfort-eating sweets and crisps and crumpets and chips, indulging in short-term pleasure at the expense of long-term happiness.

After a week or so on the boat my days were beginning to blur into each other. With no job, no fixed routine and no energy, my only tasks were to get out of bed in the morning and go back to bed at night. I found myself staring at the space between me and the TV, letting insurance adverts and the canned laughter from various sitcom reruns wash over me until it was time to go to bed. I didn't even know what interested me anymore, what my opinions were or what gave me pleasure. Funny programmes didn't make me laugh; the news didn't make me angry. Every time Mum spoke to me I felt like crying, and every time she hugged me I felt nothing. Before she went to work most days she would suggest something for me to do – go for a walk, have a shower, write my feelings down – and every evening when she got home I felt like I was disappointing her for not having attempted any of it. She never acted disappointed, of course, but that didn't stop the guilt. I felt like I'd eventually break her spirit just by being near her, and that upset me more than anything. I'd never felt more lost or more unsure of who I was. I truly

believed that there would be no way to fully recover from what was happening to me and, what was worse, I didn't even care. As long as I had my duvet, there was a part of me that, in a way, was prepared to be this person forever, because, although I felt sad, it was kind of comfy and required the least amount of effort. Depression's very good at pulling you into a hole and hugging you while you're down there. The desire to get better is replaced by a type of comfort that becomes, strangely, your mind's only source of pleasure, and over time that feeling of comfort becomes addictive. I took some sort of weird satisfaction in not having to consider whether I was making the right choices, whether I was looking out for my future self, whether I was ever going to get on the property ladder, whether my friends liked me.

A few more weeks passed before the urge to help myself surfaced. It was little more than a faint silhouette on the horizon, small and far away but there nonetheless, slowly heading towards me. I started to feel the need to do something with my days so I didn't feel like a slave to my emotions, something that made me feel like I was running myself rather than depression running me. And so, on the millionth time of Mum suggesting I take Reggie out for a walk, I eventually said yes.

The air outside was warm, but there was a slight chill from the wind, and Reggie and I walked beside the river, stopping occasionally to inspect the ducks. This soon became my and Reggie's daily routine. On our first few outings I didn't venture too far from the safety of the boat, but after a week or so I decided a change of scenery might be nice, so we took a walk across town to 'Leech's' – a humble and well-cared-for memorial garden that gazes over the tops of the trees of the town's neighbouring woodland and was the setting for many of my childhood memories. It was where my parents told me

and my brother that they were expecting my little sister, and where I was introduced to the wonders of cannabis by an older kid who got me so high that I ended my first drug experience greening out (as was the expression) in my bedroom with the curtains drawn against the sun, while playing *Doom*. Leech's was also where my neighbour and I once discovered a fledgling starling and spent the whole afternoon 'teaching it to fly'; we charged up and down the field holding the tiny bird gently between our fingers, moving our hands like the conductor of an orchestra to encourage it to flap its wings. After hours of 'training' and several nosedives, my neighbour let the bird go and the two of us cheered as we watched it soar over the bushes at the end of the garden and fly away to begin its life (we hoped).

My walks were turning into a daily dose of nostalgia, and with every day I looked forward to them more and more, and the more I was seeing positive change in myself. I noticed that my posture was improving each time I stepped off the boat, a sign that my confidence was returning, and on our morning strolls along the river I often found myself in a state of quiet appreciation of the stillness of it and the beautiful simplicity of nature. Some mornings the water looked so calm it was almost hypnotic, and as I stared into the mirrored image of the blue-and-yellow sky and every bird that flew over it, a peace would settle within me, a feeling that, not so long before, I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to experience again. Moments like these were occurring more frequently, and the serenity I felt in them began to spill over into the rest of the days. My duvet was seeing less and less daytime action, I was washing my clothes, my sleep was falling into a more normal pattern – even my hot-cross-bun intake was beginning to waver. I had begun thinking about what meals I'd like to eat and buying ingredients – avocados

for guacamole, potatoes for sausage and mash – rather than just sloping off to Costcutters for a frozen pizza and a bag of Big Hoops. I started responding to messages and even initiated the occasional chat with friends I felt I hadn't checked in with for a while. I was beginning to feel like me again, version one – the version I like – the Jake who looks after himself, and does things.

One grey afternoon in Leech's garden I freed Reg from her lead and watched her bound towards the trees, as she always did. But today she was distracted by a fly or a bee and chased it determinedly. After she'd snapped wildly a few times at thin air, charging clumsily towards it, I found myself beginning to laugh. Not in the desperate, false way I had been for the benefit of other people over the past however long but a genuine just-for-me explosion of laughter. It was the first time I'd laughed properly in months. I felt a warmth flow through me, the same kind of warmth I now feel after a run, or when my gran (Mum's mum) waves me off from her front door after a visit. Real, fluttery, but solid, a glow that spreads through my whole body. I sat calmly for a moment, not looking forwards or backwards, not focusing on who I was or my place in the world, just sitting on a bench, Reggie resting trustfully against me. I was enjoying the awareness of being there and, most importantly, feeling like I belonged there – a sensation I welcomed wholeheartedly after months and months of feeling like an uninvited guest in every setting I found myself in.

I was comfortable in the silence, involved in my surroundings and free of unwanted noise or concern, and I realized something – I felt good. The colours around me were vibrant, the loyal and affectionate energy between Reggie and me was real, and my body, the body I sat there in, the body I had so nearly destroyed a month or so previously, was alive and

functioning and capable of so much. I began thinking about how I'd got here, to this point where I now felt good, puzzling over how I'd managed to hoist myself out of such a deep, vast blackness into a place that now shone with optimism. I thought about Mum, how after I'd reached out for her she'd pulled me out from the bottom of something, and about being home, how the familiarity of the town had made me remember who I was. I thought about Reggie, how our walks had given me something to do, how her company got me off the boat and out into the open. And nature – I realized how healing simply being outside had been for me, being mindful of the warmth from the sun, the coolness of the air; how watching the trees dance in the wind and the river reflecting the sky seemed to stop time. I was remembering how at home I'd always felt in the outdoors as a kid, never, ever ready to go home, never fussed by rain and cold. I realized that I had starved myself of something I'd never known was so essential to my well-being, something I now understood I had to relearn. Being outside wasn't just about fresh air and earthy smells, it had given me the mental space I needed to let go of poisonous thoughts, to recognize that, as insufferably painful as my life had become, I had never actually wanted to die, I had just needed to remember what it was like to feel alive.

Something else was happening, too, something unexpected – an idea, or at least the beginning of an idea. With my mind alive and buzzing, I clipped Reggie's lead on and headed back into town. I tied Reggie up outside a bookshop and went inside, scouring the shelves until I spotted what I was after – a map of Great Britain. As I paid at the counter, I briefly wondered if anyone had ever been so excited to buy a map of their home country.

Back on the boat, I kicked my trainers off, opened the

map and spread it out flat on Mum's living-room rug. I grabbed a Sharpie from the drawer under the kitchen table and began furiously circling every section of natural Britain I could see – national parks, AONB (areas of outstanding natural beauty), trails, beaches – anywhere that was green and didn't have tangles of roads coming out of it. I vanished into a nomadic daydream, picturing myself walking through pure British countryside with just a bag on my back, my skin tanned and my hair bleached by the sun. I saw myself hiking through the Lake District, the Scottish Highlands, along the rugged coast of Cornwall. And in doing so, I found myself wondering . . .

How had I let it go so wrong? What had I been doing all this time, allowing myself to be restricted, to stay in one place for so long and let that place eat me up? Somewhere along the line I'd lost touch with the boy who loved disappearing into the woods to cut down bracken. I'd been conforming, trying to live a life that made sense to other people, working myself into sickness, trying to combat negative feelings by buying stuff I didn't need. My life hadn't been especially difficult, I just hadn't given myself a chance. I hadn't paused to see where I was headed, I hadn't looked out for myself, and I hadn't fed my soul anything real in a long, long time. I felt the simultaneous need to escape but also to gain control.

I looked down at my map. Chaos. Frenzied notes and broken circles fought one another for space on the page. But my mind was clear – something felt right. Within the mess, I scouted for possible places to walk, beautiful areas to explore where I could reconnect with a world I so desperately wanted to feel again – the natural world. There were so many places to go. I couldn't decide between them, so in the end I connected all the circles I'd drawn with a thick, black line. What appeared before me was a giant loop. A lap of Great Britain.

I stared at it for a few minutes, letting my mind get high on daydreams about living life as a drifter. Walking for days and weeks on end, immersed in idyllic surroundings with no material possessions and not a care in the world. A life where breathing lungfuls of untarnished air and watching the landscape transform from coast to forest, from hills to mountains, became my routine. I imagined the privilege of watching the sun rise and fall in a new setting every day, the bliss of sleeping under a canopy of stars and, finally, I pictured myself standing at the top of a mountain, nothing but beautiful open space expanding for miles and miles beneath my feet in every direction.

I thought about the concept of triumph over adversity, how hitting rock bottom is what some people must have to do to unlock their potential. I was fresh out of my lowest point, where I felt like I had nothing, and so, in a way, I was back at zero again. Nothing to lose, no expectations, no plans. This was a chance for a new everything, a life that I wrote out myself, that started with me simply leaving. I needed to just go. I wasn't walking away from anything; it felt more like I was walking towards something. Perhaps it was the massiveness of my collapse, but I couldn't help but think big. I knew, in that moment, that I was going to walk a lap of Great Britain and rediscover just how incredible life could be.

3

I've come to realize that stepping away from everything for a short time when you're feeling overwhelmed by it can actually be the most productive thing you can do. Having head space is crucial to working out exactly what it is that needs to change. If you can identify the things that need to change, then do yourself a huge favour and change them. If you can't change the situation, try and change how you approach it or look at it. Once life becomes manageable, it stops being so overwhelming. And there's one thing that's certain: no one fantasizes about driving full speed away from a life they're enjoying.

Standing there, astride my map in Mum's living room, I began to walk the route in my mind. It began in Brighton, the city I'd lived in for eight years before I moved to east London and a place I still considered my home from home. From Brighton's Palace Pier, the path went west in more or less a straight line, hugging the three hundred or so miles of coastline that connects the coastal counties of southern England – Sussex, Hampshire, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall. At Britain's most south-westerly point, Land's End, the line continued along about four hundred miles of coast to Bristol, passing through Exmoor National Park in North Devon, as well as the counties of Somerset and Gloucestershire. After a loop of around seven hundred miles around Wales (my black line passing without pause through the Brecon Beacons, the Pembrokeshire Coast and the epic mountains of Snowdonia), the route shifted east into the English Midlands, then swung north for roughly two hundred miles

along the Pennine Way, which cuts through both the Peak District and Yorkshire Dales national parks.

I thought for a moment about the possibility of making my journey public, of the hope it might bring to others. By showcasing Britain's most stunning natural areas I might inspire other people to get outside to experience the healing power of nature for themselves. I felt so caught up in my idea it was like all the answers to everything we spend our whole lives looking for were right there, just outside our front doors. Hugging my arms around myself to slow my heart, I squeezed my eyes shut and let the sun beaming through the window bathe my face. When I opened my eyes again, I continued tracing the line to Cumbria, in the Lake District. How many miles had my finger covered to get there? After a quick tot-up, it was around the 1,200-mile mark. I had my first moment of hesitation. Maybe this was all a bit much.

As I followed the eighty-four-mile section of Hadrian's Wall, beginning at Bowness-on-Solway, the magnitude of what was involved in doing a 'lap of Britain' began to dawn on me. This was nuts. No one was going to take me seriously when I told them I was going to attempt this. But, for some reason, that only made the prospect of doing it more appealing. Imagine if I pulled this off – an overweight, clinically depressed barman with flat feet and a coke habit. The idea was so potent and all-consuming I decided to stop thinking about whether it was possible and began simply believing that I would succeed. This level of self-belief would have been unusual enough for me on a good day; the fact that I had this much confidence while I was still in the (albeit loosening) grip of depression was nothing short of a miracle.

I ran my finger up the coastal path of the English north-west before crossing the border and entering the section of Britain that excited me the most. Scotland. My route into

Scotland again followed the coastline, north for roughly 150 miles to Edinburgh, then across to Glasgow and north again along the famous West Highland Way, ninety-six miles of lochs and mountains to Fort William. From there, I traced seventy-nine miles along the Great Glen Way, hugging the banks of Loch Ness, to Inverness. After that it was just a thousand miles or so south through the Cairngorms, the south-east coast of Scotland, the North York Moors, the east of England, East Anglia, Essex, London, and then – bosh, back at the Palace Pier for a cup of beer and a bag of hot doughnuts.

Looking at the map felt like looking into my future, but it didn't feel real, more like I'd just cast myself in the lead role of an epic adventure story. This would be a once-in-a-lifetime voyage for anyone, and so, with no prior experience and no real business putting myself forward for such a colossally impractical venture, I simply thought, fuck it. And started planning.

I kept my plan to myself for about a week, letting it fine-tune itself in my head before I told my mum, who has a history of bringing my more, let's say, 'romantic' projects back down to earth. Once, when I was nineteen, I got it in my head that out of all the directions my life could go in after college, moving to Nepal to train with Tibetan monks was the stand-out vocational choice. My propensity for big, unrealistic ideas and Mum's sensible outlook has kept me grounded over the years, so I was a little worried about how she'd react to this one. A grandiose venture like walking a lap of the UK was, in all probability, just as shoot-down-able as a monastic life up a Nepalese mountain, so before I let the cat out of the bag I had to make doubly sure I'd thought it all through properly.

To my surprise, when I did tell her, my idea was met with little more than a raised-eyebrow smile. No laughter, no eye-rolling and no immediate questions. If anything, Mum seemed happy that I appeared so animated after months of despondency, and even indulged me when the plan started developing with small comments like 'I've always wanted to go up to the Highlands' and, when I was researching backpacks, 'Which one's going to be your Doritos pocket?'

Mum's got a real talent for questioning my reasons for doing things without pushing me one way or the other, balancing any serious questions with a genuine interest in my life. Her concern is never intrusive; she encourages me to make my own mistakes, only taking the piss when I'm saying something really stupid – and even this is done with so much love I could never get annoyed by it. The night we sat down together to talk through my plans she treated the conversation as if I were coming to her for advice on applying for a new job, or buying a car, welcoming my ideas as real life decisions and not just the ramblings of a jobless dreamer. The scent of Mum's blackcurrant tea filled the space between us and, her arms enveloping her knees, she leaned forward and fixed her eyes on mine and smiled.

'Right, go on, then,' she said.

'Right, so.' I crushed my cigarette out in the ornate tiled dish in the centre of the table and wondered briefly if I should quit smoking. 'All right, let's forget the actual walking bit for a minute,' I said. 'I want to tell you why I'm doing this.'

She raised her head, her expression turning to one of curiosity.

I clasped my hands together. 'I didn't know how I was going to get better after what happened to me in London,' I started.

Mum dipped her head slightly to acknowledge my pain without breaking my flow.

I brushed my thumb back and forth across my knuckles and continued. 'I really didn't think I was ever going to get better, you know. I couldn't see a way out. But taking Reg for walks, it's the missing link connecting me back to a bit of me I didn't even know had gone missing. I haven't had anything else, I haven't taken one antidepressant, haven't gone to any more therapy sessions. The space and fresh air and walking have made me feel like this. I don't know where it's come from. But something's telling me this is something I have to do. There's nothing to hold me back right now, but who knows how long that'll last. This is my chance to do something.'

I was struck by the similarity between this conversation and the one I'd had just a few months ago with the tight-trousered doctor. My mind was again overflowing with emotion that I couldn't really understand or process, only this time it wasn't devastating, it was heartening. This time, the breaths that followed the tumbling words were delicious, full of possibility, powerful. Hearing those words spoken in my voice excited me. I knew then that I was going to get better, and this was how I was going to do it.

Mum nodded. 'This is what you've needed, Jakey, something to throw yourself into, and it probably doesn't get more nourishing or wholesome than living outdoors for six months. And you're really sure that this is the thing that's going to make you feel better?'

'Yeah, I know it will.'

'Well,' she said, 'you'd better get on with it then.'

At this stage I was excited, and that was about it. I hadn't thought about the actual walking, my safety, my poor fitness levels or whether I'd make a plan. Jake version one was