

## Looking Good

Twenty. Twenty. Twenty minutes' running is nothing, if you're used to it. As I lace up my trainers, squeeze in one last stretch and step out into the cool bright air, I remind myself that twenty minutes is only once round the park. It's 5 minutes to walk there, and I focus intently on the path in front of me. I think of all my aims and goals; the steps I take a kind of analogy for my progress back to fitness.

I was used to twenty minutes' running before my enforced extended break; *more* than twenty minutes - I would think nothing of jogging easily a 5K run and be home for breakfast. That was a lifetime ago.

At the gate, the park smells of wet leaves and as I break into a jog, my first thought is to just watch where I put my feet. I don't need the sudden jolt of slipping over. I can do this; I can.

The consultant had talked to me about recovery after the second procedure, and I told him that I'd already set goals and planned to be fully fit again 'in no time'. He corrected me: 'in time', he said. Well, the time's now. I glance at my watch. The thought strikes me how wonderful I can do that; a simple, everyday task. Just look at me, looking.

My breaths begin to quicken. I can do this; I can do this. Breathe in, right left, right left, right left, breathe out, right left, right left, right left...

Lungs working harder now. Whole body - out of shape - because one tiny bit (well, two) - needed replacing. Think: my goals. Return to work was easy - cos working from home. Next goal? Promotion.

Can drive again. Could do that road trip. What else. Maybe tennis. Need to get fit. Promotion. By next year. More money - new car. Get patio sorted. Too much to do! Breathe in, right left, right left, breathe out, twenty, twenty.

Slowing down, to steady breathing. Twigs on the path, river to my right, bridge up ahead. All bobbing up and down as I jog. That's weird, never noticed on my 5Ks before. How your surroundings move with you.

Twirling down ahead is a leaf. Dancing in the air. Past that, a white-bellied gull. Flapping then gliding its powerful way. And further - the brightness of the town centre in the valley, roofs of all shapes in silver, grey and purple, spires, cranes, tower blocks, many windows shining and - beyond, cloud shapes brush against the blue...the enormity of it all begins to build itself up into a tower tight around me, yet seeing that view taps into something deep in my middle, a gentle rhythm sending power to my whole being and I thrust out my legs; I can run with vigour. My very scalp seems to lighten as if I had been wearing a heavy hat and looking at the bird had made the hat grow wings and lift away; my head felt easier. Even my arms, swinging slightly forwards and back as I run, now break free and stretch wide for a moment to embrace it all. I laugh a little, suddenly, to think what that must look like. Well, let them look - eyes are for using.

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Black, thick and hard it's suddenly right there in front of me; it's at eye level and I stop. Just in time. A big branch. Panting slightly, I put my hand on it; the rough, almost warm bark grounds me again. That was close. I should look where I'm going.

Not just look – see. Where I'm going, where I've been. Where I am. Look around. If I run again now, I could complete twenty minutes; I need this to progress. Why then am I standing, breath steaming, hands on hips and chin lifted, turning slowly on the spot. I see all-shades-of-brown tree branches both straight and crooked, criss-crossing their patterns; then I'm looking at the low slate-grey wall by the river that leads the eye off up towards the mossy green side of the old bridge; then I see the children's playground with all its reds, greens and yellows. Standing still then, I look down again. In front of my feet, almost glowing in the midst of the liquorice-black mud and leather-brown leaves, a bright lime-green caterpillar body surrounded with white hairy tufts, arches and stretches his way across the path. I stoop to rescue him on a leaf, moving him to one side. It was a good thing I saw him. I see a lot more now. For so long denied me, now I have 20:20 vision. It's like seeing the world through someone else's eyes. Which, in a way, I am. Thank you, whoever you were – thank you.