

## ONE BLOCK

‘Trexax trexax! Thax se piaso me tin pantofla  
(Run, run! I will catch you and hit you with this slipper).’

– yiayia

Stopping drugs and alcohol (and smoking) has a profound impact on the way you spend your time. Gone are the wasted hours of using and partying, and the long days of sleeping. A whole new world opens up, one in which you wake up as the sun rises – every day of the week. You are also wide awake when you are up. All these hours come back into your life. The day is filled with time. Time for what? This is where something new started to creep into my life. Exercise! The word alone would make me recoil in disgust. All that effort and exertion and energy was something I scorned on a daily basis.

I’m Greek. We exercise by throwing dice onto a backgammon board and lifting espresso cups. Of course, I knew exercise was good for me. But so were many other things in the old days, like diet and restful sleep, and I’d scorned those too. In addition to time, something else becomes available in abundance when you’re in recovery. Energy! One day, this energy led to a ground-breaking moment that was to change my life forever.

My boyfriend Dana had started running. He used to be a good runner in his youth and had decided to take it up again to get fit. He was over 40 and looking for ways to get onto a healthier path while he was still young enough to do so. He was training for the gruelling 89 km Comrades Marathon that takes place every winter. Training for this race, for those with an already strong base of running, takes about eight months of almost daily running. On most weekends, he would get up before me and head out for his daily run. I would stir a little and wait for him to leave before cracking a smile to myself. How silly he was wasting his time with all this running, I would think. But one morning, a madness came over me.

‘I’m coming running with you,’ I said to him.

‘Go back to sleep, Cos,’ he said.

‘No, really. Wait for me. I won’t be a minute.’

He rolled his eyes. *Oh shit! What did I just sign up for?* was my immediate thought. What shoes do I wear? I rummaged in the cupboard and found a pair of old-fashioned sneakers – the kind that

worked well on a dancefloor and had got me through many all-nighters. *These puppies will do just great*, I thought.

‘Time for some carbo-loading,’ I said to him.

‘You must be joking, right?’ he answered. ‘You carbo-load a day or two before a race. This is an early morning training run. Get moving or I’m leaving.’

I quickly drank some juice, then came up with another pre-run delay tactic.

‘Time to stretch. It’s been a long time since I last ran and I don’t want to hurt anything.’ This was a desperate plea for him to let me off the hook. Surely it would work.

‘You stretch *after* a run, and besides, you’ve never run before. I’m leaving.’ He headed for the door. It was now or never: get up off the kitchen bar stool and venture out into the uncertain terrain of body movement and exercise, or stay here, watch him leave and head back to bed.

I got up and followed him out the door. We headed down the hill. He mentioned that we would start by going around the block. My heart started pounding, but my legs were strong. I could feel the air rushing on my face, which was a new sensation so early in the morning. Halfway around the block I started to tire, and we slowed down. It was a tough moment: I wanted to give up, but my partner pushed me along with encouragement.

‘Come on, Cos. We’re warming up,’ he said.

I must have heard wrong. ‘Warming up’ meant things had not even started. I was nearing the peak of my ability. I was dying. I ignored his comment, put my head down and pushed hard. I picked up the pace; I was going to do this. I had finally found a spring in my step. I was bouncing to great new heights.

‘Stop shuffling your feet. Pick them up,’ he said. Okay, so maybe I wasn’t pushing as hard as I thought. But yikes, it was hurting. We came around to the end of the block and were back near our gate. I ran towards it. We were done! Relief at last. I noticed Dana had not followed me. He had stopped, and was shouting at me.

‘Turn around, we’ve only done one block!’

I was very confused. We had completed our run for the day, had we not?

‘You go on. I’m done.’

He left, continuing the run he had planned. I went into the apartment and ran a hot bath. I soaked my tired legs in the warm water, with a large grin on my face. *I have started running*, I thought. I washed, dried myself, and jumped into bed. I was floating on a high. I lay there, dreamy-eyed, contemplating what had just happened. I had officially completed my first training run. I was so proud of myself. I treated myself to a catnap, as I felt super tired. I had officially run one entire large block. I had once measured the distance around the block, but had forgotten what it was. So, the next day I drove my car around it. It had two little hills in it. I eagerly looked at my odometer. It measured 700 m!

My incredible achievement was a whole 700 m. I know what you're thinking. You'd cover 700 m walking around the office in a day. But to me, it represented so much more. Sitting in my car at the 700 m mark outside our gate, I named this my one-block moment. Looking at the gate, I started thinking about these words. Something profound started to surface. The number one is important to me. I have come to realise more and more that I live in a binary world. By way of example, I'm either using drugs, or I'm not. Working on my recovery, or not. Moving towards success, or not. My life has been characterised by a series of ones and zeroes. I was either going to stay in bed that day, or go running. In my case, a block was a very short 700 m, a training session that almost everybody would laugh at. But I realised that a block represented more than a unit of measurement. A block, I thought, was one part of something. Most often, a block is part of something much bigger. Building blocks came to mind. I thought of LEGO, which I loved as a kid. You never played with just one block – you always built something bigger. You also never left one block lying around, alone. It was always attached to another block. It *needed* other blocks. I had created my first block. What would happen next in the LEGO of my life?

I didn't think much about the run the next day, but a few days later I woke up wondering what it would feel like to run one block again. I mean, I had one LEGO block lying around, waiting to be used. So, that Saturday I woke up at the same time as my partner and asked if I could join him on his morning run.

'What? I'm happy for you, but please, this time, can you pick up the pace?'

I didn't blame him for being impatient. Running at snail's pace when you are well on track to an ultramarathon can't be pleasant.

'Let's do this!' I sounded all pumped and ready to take this on.

I selected a vest that pulled really tight over my belly. I was now in rather unhealthy shape: two very skinny legs and a growing middle section. Toothpicks for arms, and no shoulders. I was no

cover boy, with my belly showing too prominently and my seriously out-of-fashion running-style shorts. Off we headed. Again, I found myself struggling on the two hills. But I pushed as hard as I could.

‘Oh no, where are you going?’ shouted Dana.

‘I’m done!’

And I was. I went home again. I lay in the bath, soothing my tired legs, thinking *I have officially run twice in one week*. The scale of the achievement was huge. I was now a twice-a-week runner. That felt insane and unnatural. ‘Natural’ was running to the shops to get chocolate. ‘Natural’ was dancing all night. This was totally out of character. What the hell was I doing? Why did I feel so awesome? Perhaps I could do this again, twice, next week. Just repeat what I had done. *Nothing new, just a continuation of my brilliance of this week*, I thought. Something interesting happened on the second run I did that following week. I got to the end of the block and thought, *Maybe you can run a second block. Try it, even if you walk it*. Much to my surprise and glee, I ran (shuffled) most of it. And there I had it. A 100 per cent improvement on my previous run – 100 per cent! I’d only ever got 100 per cent finishing a bottle of beer in the past.

One block had led to two. I had always heard that exercise done repetitively would result in fitness and, naturally, an increase in exercise volume. I’d never experienced this with my own body, though. Never had I felt my own legs experience it. Never had I felt something so viscerally. I had doubled what I had done the week before. It was in my bones, a cumulative effect beating inside me with every sore twitch of my muscles.

The following week, I decided to run one block again – three times. What happened was that I ran a double block on all three occasions, more than doubling the previous week’s achievements.

‘So, how many kilometres did you run this week?’ my partner asked.

‘I ran 4.2 km,’ I told him. ‘I’m so bloody happy with myself. I’m a runner now.’ I felt like I was part of an elite group of humans who take their bodies to a new limit of perfection. I was now that guy.

‘How many did you run?’ I asked, keen to compare our achievements.

‘I did 84 km.’

Fuck! At that moment, I galvanised my next motivational concept.