

Aged twenty-nine, she buys her first running shoes

and goes running in circles to be safe. Her preferred route takes her up Blue Anchor Lane, past the white house that used to be a tavern, along the Muckingford Road towards Chadwell St Mary as far as Turnpike Lane. Then left again to the top of Gunn Hill, and left past the playing field and post box, into the village with its three-cornered green. Sometimes she calls in at the pub. All that first summer, she runs every day, building up to two or three circuits. She runs before breakfast or late in the evening to minimise the risk of being seen. Her husband says nothing, neither praises nor mocks her, but she can tell from his eyes he finds her ludicrous. She is sad about this but she doesn't let it stop her. Now she is running for fun. By September, she's grown bolder, faster, fitter but her husband still calls her Dumpling. She buys new shoes from a proper sports shop and lies about how much they cost. She expands her route so that she runs across the marshes where the road unwinds towards Tilbury, past the travellers' ponies and a few sad sheep, across the saltings where the fog rolls in quickly, swallowing the skyline, all trace of Shell Haven, the sea-wall, the station, the road. She thinks of fog as the river breathing out. Her husband says she's read too many stories. He says she's got her head in the clouds. Some days maybe that's true. Pink-cheeked and panting, she pushes herself on, past the ramshackle walls of The Old World's End, which is a pub where an old man once abused her. She gives his ghost the finger. Ghosts like his are the reason why she even needs to run. Breathing hard, she turns, where the road peters out, becoming a track of black cinders, on to Tilbury Fort, which rears up like a giant, blustering and red in the face. The fort is neglected, grim and forbidding, not a place yet for picnics or outings. She likes it that its long grass is weedy with dandelions, unruly with brambles and stones. She likes it that here she can lean against the sea-wall and stare across the still, grey water. There's a tug or two sometimes, once an old barge, and the ferry points its nose towards Gravesend. And, before she turns back, the thought occurs that, after all, escape might be possible. She will run in circles, keep her wise counsel. One day soon, seize her chance.