

# Running

by Kit Fennessy, 2023

*My muscular body is covered in fur. It has been said that I am a magnificent beast, though these humans cannot see my full self, a pan-dimensional being that has extended itself into this, their four-dimensional world.*

The sun beat down, its light harsh, accompanied by the sound of cicadas. The street was broader than anything in cities, a chain wide for the tarmac road, dirt on the sides with no gutters and no footpaths. The verges were as wide as the road itself and were comprised of crab grass and stones, the houses – mostly Californian bungalows – set way back. There were hardly any trees in the nature strips, just a few newly planted stunted sticks with purple leaves.

A boy, his school bag hanging from a hot and sore shoulder, slouched groggily homeward, the satchel smacking his bum and legs. The kid kicked a stone as he walked, which skipped along in front of him.

*In this world, this world of humans, the inhabitants never suspected that I was on a secret mission. One to bring down an inter-dimensional despot that had been hiding amongst them in plain sight.*

A black figure raced toward the boy, its slavering jaws open, dagger-like teeth bared.

The kid glanced up, eyes widening.

In a beat, the animal was on him.

'Get down Tiger, cor, you're annoying sometimes.'

The kid playfully pushed his pet down. The dog was a cross-between an Alsatian and sheep dog, black and shaggy.

*My "owner" thought me a common dog. But unbeknownst to him, I was on a mission to catch a fugitive from justice. A dictator who had been on the run for over three millennia.*

'I see you're still gettin' around with the black dog.' The man who spoke was washing an FE Holden sedan on the side of the hot road. The car was cream coloured and had a long chrome trim arrow down the middle of the bonnet. The boy stopped and called through the heat haze that shimmered between them.

'Why do you always say that?'

'What's that, mate?'

'About "the black dog", Mr Müller.'

'Saying you've got the black dog means you're depressed. It's "a joke Joyce".'

A pigeon loft could just be seen over Müller's tin roof.

'Running the birds today?' the boy asked.

The man nodded. 'Dropped 'em out past the Sugar Loaf and left 'em with Bedgie. They'll be coming in over the next couple of hours.'

*My target's name? Py-G Eon. In this realm they couldn't recognise him, since they were slaves of the space time continuum. They simply couldn't see him for who he truly was. His "keeper" thought him a racing pigeon, naming him Speckled Jim the Third... but Py-G was soon to be mine.*

The boy and dog continued the hot slog through the summer furnace, over crackly lawn to a house on the next corner.

The bungalow loomed behind a low, prickly hedge that grew over a three-foot-high wire fence. The house itself was timber, but there was a rendered brick entrance archway built on the front for respectability, the word "Duncarin" in wrought iron over the curved entrance. The boy and his furred companion didn't go in the front, but trickled their way up the side, under the merciful shade of trees. The house deteriorated as they moved toward the back, even though the home was only two rooms deep. They turned around the lemon tree that cast permanent shadow on the back corner, revealing an extension that had been tacked on, with a bedroom and outdoor toilet that was plumbed in, as well as a wet area and wood box by the screen door.

'Hi Mum.' The kitchen was hotter than outside, heated by the wood-fired stove his mother worked at, a hot blush to her cheeks.

'Wash your hands. I've got you a sandwich. Then cut me some wood, darl, I'm nearly out.'

'Ah, mum...'

'No cheek, or I'll tell your father. And put on your overalls. I don't want you getting your good clothes dirty.'

The kid went back past the wood box to the sleep-out in the back, pulling his olive overalls out of a dark, grave-like cupboard built into the wall under a sloping roof with a bow in the plaster. There was a football in the bottom, bloated and almost circular, the stitching going, the smell of lanolin.

Later, after chopping wood and – by then – loading up the kindling, the boy's eyes drifted to the top of the wood box. There were some rags, a container with tins of shoe polish, a half net of oranges, and a slug gun leaning in the corner. The air rifle, propped and aiming at the roof, looked bored. The kid discretely took the gun down and poured a handful of pellets into his palm from a small, worn cardboard box.

'Basil?'

There was the sound of the screen door opening, the sigh and stretch of a spring and he was gone... before his mother could find him any more chores to do.

The boy stalked around the weatherboard house with his faithful hound, going the opposite way from his original approach, past the silverbeet patch outside his parents' room, back to the front yard and hedgerow, completing a circuit of the property, only this time with a rifle over his forearm. The word Duncarin' was over his right shoulder, behind him now, as the boy and his shaggy companion Tiger sheltered in the shade of the house considering the street, the sun setting and the light turning to the golden hour.

The box cut hedge was hard and compact, a street sign on the corner a few metres behind it hanging from a dilapidated timber power pole. The sign read "Murphy Street", bits of rust along the bottom and more than a few small dings in it.

Basil cracked the barrel, the butt of the gun pressing into his thigh as he forced air into a hidden cylinder in the stock. The boy inserted a soft tin slug in the barrel, then clicked it back easily with an up-swinging. He leant on the hedge, the prickles of the twigs coming through his top.

Basil took aim.

“Hoik... spit”.

He pressed the trigger while he spat, covering the soft “phfft” of the shot with a cartoonish “poik” sound as he spat. The pellet hit the sign moments after with a satisfying “ting”.

The street sign made an excellent cymbal.

Tiger barked and wagged his tail.

‘Ya liked that, pardner?’ Basil asked in his best movie accent, his mouth a slick of saliva as he thought of tobacco spitters in the Westerns. ‘That’s nothing. I’ll do ya another one, boy.’

After a reload, he closed one eye, peering along the rifle, his concentration supreme, holding his breath.

‘Hoik, spit...’

Just at the critical moment, the magnificent black dog jumped up, hitting Basil’s arm as he pulled the trigger.

The expected corresponding “ting” never eventuated.

Something fell out of the sky in the background instead.

Tiger was off like a black flash. He’d been taught to retrieve, and returned with a proud step and soft mouth, dropping the bird that the errant shot had felled at the kid’s foot.

Basil examined the corpse warily, giving it a poke with his toe. It was a racing pigeon. Müller’s. Speckled Jim the III. Mr Müller would kill him... if his father hadn’t already done the job first. Basil’s dad usually belted him with whatever came immediately to hand when he was wild and dealing out retribution. The boy still had a splinter in his bum from his last thrashing with a piece of kindling.

Basil looked down at his dog. Tiger seemed to be grinning in triumph.

‘Ya dumb mutt.’

The dog didn’t seem to care about the rebuke, looking for all intents and purposes thoroughly pleased with himself.

*As well I might.*