

# 1

Some people have a good run, others have a bad run. The difference between the two is where you start and where you end up. I've had a bad run for too long.

A good run starts near where you pick up your papers. And it ends near your house. A bad run has you walking for miles. Matt has the good run for my street and I want it. He starts delivering papers just past Flers and then up Messines, all the way to his home on Versailles. I have a long, hilly walk to the start of my run and another one home.

Mrs Whiteman is the boss of the paperboys. The truck drops the papers at her garage and she counts out piles of thirty or so for each run. We stuff them into our green Evening Post bags and march off like the infantry of a child army. By the time I finish my run I can't be bothered walking all the way home. So I don't. I cut through instead.

In my suburb every house backs on to the one behind. If you cut through, these houses become a secret passage into the next street. But you need to do a recce beforehand. You need to keep your eyes and ears open. It's about learning the houses and the people. You need to know who lives where, what they're like and if they've got a dog. You gotta pick whether the father is home, or if he's angry, and you need to understand what they'll do if a kid jumps over the back fence.

Cutting through on old people is best; they never make trouble. Even if they notice you, you're gone before they can haul themselves out of their chair. Some kids make more noise when it's an old person's house, just to scare them. But I don't, you always need to be on guard. You can tell an old person's house: the paint is peeling, the garden is overgrown, the curtains are pulled and the garage closed.

The cut-through at the end of my run, 62 Ponsonby, is an old man's house. To get home I sneak through his garden, under a hedge and into the No Man's Land around the Russian Embassy. This puts me halfway up Messines and saves me about twenty minutes. I deliver papers on six days so I save a grand total of two hours a week. Which is a lot.

As payment for cutting through I give this old guy first-class service. I climb up his steps and tuck the paper under the doormat, keeping it safe and dry. Not like my other houses; I only stick their papers half in and when it rains, the papers get wet. Then they have to be dried out in the oven, like dinner for a late-home Dad.

A good southerly storm comes straight up from Antarctica, musters in Cook Strait and attacks Wellington with all it has. The hills of Karori, where my run is, are the front line. And it was in one of these good southerlies that I arrived at my cut-through to find a car in the driveway. Having been out in this southerly for hours I was cold and wet and sick of it. I should've gone the long way home 'cause this was a working, functioning car, a car a real person drove, and it changed 62 Ponsonby from being an old person's house; I should've walked away. But the prospect of retreating, taking the long way home, made me shiver.

I climbed the steps, tucked the paper under the mat, paused, listened and heard nothing. I headed down the steps, trying to make it look like I was going back towards the front gate. But once I was at the bottom, below window height, I turned and went for the hedge. I walked quickly because you should never run a cut-through. People's eyes are drawn to running.

When I got to the hedge, thinking I was safe, I took a victorious look back at the house and this was when I realised my cover had been blown. Staring at me from a back-room window was a lady and she wasn't happy. She wore an apron and the same yellow gloves Mum uses to clean the oven. These gloves were planted firmly on her hips. Holding her hair tightly in place was a bright red scarf. We looked at each other for a few seconds and then she held up a yellow glove for me to stop.

Ignoring her I ducked into the tunnel under the hedge as quick as I could. I was sure she'd be sounding the alarm. But I was gone long before I heard it. I kept low along the Russian Embassy fence trying to avoid the searchlights I expected any minute. I kept running when

I got to Messines expecting to hear guard dogs barking behind me. But when I turned around there was nothing but empty road.

At 133 there's a locked gate that guards a water tank and the long drive down to the back of the houses of my street. Standing on the gate I could hear a car's tyres on the wet road. Turning I saw the car from 62 Ponsonby coming slowly down the hill. Dammit.

I started running harder, past mothers half-heartedly doing dishes. They didn't bother with me; I came down here almost every day. I rushed through my back door, closing it tight behind me. I crawled to the front room, leaving a wet trail. Still panting from my run, I pulled myself onto the couch and peeked out the window. Just in time to see the car come over the hill into our street.

It parked deep in the cul-de-sac, between my house and number 42. The lady with the red scarf got out and stood in the middle of the road like she owned it. She looked odd standing in the rain with her gloves and apron on. I hunkered down into the couch. I was like that for a minute or so, trying to work out what to do. I peeked up and over again and she was still there, occupying my street, looking into windows, searching for signs of life, like the Gestapo.

My little sister walked in and stood behind me, wondering what game I was playing.

'Get down,' I whispered to her.

She got down into a crouch, and whispered back, 'Why?'

Before I could answer, my older brother came in and shouted, 'Out.'

It wasn't worth telling him to get down. He wouldn't do it.

'Oh shit, you're bloody wet,' he shouted at me. 'Go and get changed.'

I crawled down off the couch and headed to my room, my sister crawling behind me; two soldiers behind enemy lines.

'Stand up,' my brother shouted. When we didn't, he said to himself, 'Why can't you just be normal?'

I was in my room, starting to get undressed, when my brother asked through the door, 'Why is there a lady in the street, looking at our house?'

'How would I know?' I replied in my best innocent voice.

'What have you done?' my brother continued.

'My paper run,' I called back. It wasn't a complete lie; in fact it was almost the truth. But I needn't have worried. My brother had lost interest. I finished getting changed and went back to the front room. I crawled across the floor, sneaked up onto the couch

and looked out at the road. The lady had gone. I'd made good my escape.

A day or so later I was reading a *Commando* comic in the dining room, number 270 from 1967, 'Runaway Hero', when the phone rang. I ignored it until I could feel my mother looking at me from the kitchen. Listening to her side of the conversation I could tell someone was asking questions about me.

'Yes, I'm his mother. Yes, he has a paper run. Yes, he does Ponsonby Road. Now, I don't know about that. I'm sure he wouldn't do that. You saw him, did you?'

Now I knew was sunk. And I knew who had sunk me. Mrs White-man. She'd give me up without a second thought.

I could feel Mum's eyes on me. 'Yes, Miss Moloney, I'll bring him round. Sunday at four.'

As Mum put the phone down she turned to me, trying to control her anger. Mum thinks she's being a bad mum if she gets angry and shouts. But she doesn't know how scared we are of her when she's angry. Anger is dangerous because it can push a parent into going way past fair. Mum's scared of using her anger so she uses guilt instead, tries to make us feel bad about what we've done, hoping that we'll learn to be better. But we don't, 'cause with guilt all that happens is we get grounded and 'a chance to think about what we've done'. But if Mum used her anger I'd have no idea what was coming.

'You know what that was about?' she asked.

'No,' I lied. It was better to pretend that I didn't, so we could go through the whole routine. We'd done this many times. We both knew what to do. It always ended with me acting sorry and my mother happy. Happy that she'd punished me and happy that she'd been a good, not an angry, parent.

'That lady on the phone's from 62 Ponsonby Road. Did you run through their garden?'

'What day?' I asked, trying to make my face as blank and innocent as possible.

'Did you?'

'Yeah I did, but only once and only 'cause I was cold. And if I didn't cut through it'd be another twenty minutes to get home, and I was really cold. It was a good southerly Mum.'

I paused to let her think about her small, helpless son, battling against a good southerly, battling for survival. With her motherly sympathy kicking in, I brought the villain into the story.

‘It’s really unfair that I’ve got such a bad run. I’ve asked Mrs Whiteman lots of times if I can change. Every time someone quits I ask. But she always gives the good runs to her favourites. All Matt does is walk home on his run. My run ends way down at the bottom of the hill.’ I could see from her face that I had hit my mark.

‘That might very well be Zac but that does not give you the right to trespass. More than that, Miss Moloney said you scared her father half to death.’

I didn’t believe that. I bet the old man hadn’t even noticed me. I did it every day and he’d never said anything, to anyone. It was the lady, the daughter. I should’ve walked away when I saw the car.

Her voice was almost a sigh. ‘We are going round there on Sunday afternoon so you can apologise.’

We stood there looking at each other. Mum spoke first, remembering that she had to punish me. Especially now she was being punished too.

‘For sneaking through, and for lying, you’re grounded. Go to your room ...’

This was perfect, the best result I could have hoped for. By being grounded I could reread all my *Commando* comics. Matt might lend me his. I could read them in order. Front to back, first to last. All in one go.

‘... so you can think about what you have done.’

I would be thinking about what I had done, all right. What I had done wrong to get caught.

## 2

We were going visiting so Mum dressed me as a little man: collared shirt, trousers, shoes and socks. She brushed my hair down into a nice part and held it there using some of Dad's old hair oil. She washed my face and hands, even though I'd said I'd done it. We walked up our street, down Messines, along Braithwaite and then up Ponsonby. All the time I wanted desperately to say: 'See how far it is. See. And it was raining.' But I didn't. It was best to pretend like I'd 'seen sense'. Let Mum think her punishment had worked, that she'd been a good mother.

We got to 62 Ponsonby and the car was there. That ended my final hope of getting out of the apology. My mother knocked, forceful steps approached the door and the lady who'd caught me opened it. She was spotless: her clothes like a teacher's. No gloves and apron now. Her hair was free of a scarf and was plaited. She had make-up on which made her look even more disapproving. It was a look that adults save for kids.

'Mrs Le Burn, thank you for coming. Come in,' the lady said, ignoring me.

'There's no need to for that Miss Moloney,' Mum said brightly. 'Zac is ready to apologise. We won't keep you a minute. Go on Zac ...'

Just as I was about to make my apology the lady interrupted.

'Mrs Le Burn I insist,' she said, in a voice that gave us no choice. Standing back from the doorway she continued, her voice softer, 'Come in, please.'

My mother held out her arm, pointing me towards the door, her face rigid.

The kitchen smelled like bleach and damp were in a battle to the death and I couldn't tell which was winning. The lady showed us through another door, into the living room. There was no battle in

there; it was dank and musty. The curtains were open and in the weak sunshine I could see dust flying around. The curtains were all jumbled like they were open for the first time in ages. Along one wall what appeared to be little monsters were hidden inside dusty cabinets. Dirty brown glass made the pictures on the other walls strange and secretive. Unread *Evening Posts* and letters were in neat piles on the floor. But you could tell that they used to be strewn all over. The furniture was old and unused except for one armchair. This looked well worn and loved; in it sat an old man. He'd been dressed up like me, and looked odd wearing a tie and jacket with slippers. His face was kind though and he was half-smiling at the room. He held his head at an odd angle as we walked in.

'Good afternoon, Mr Moloney,' Mum said.

'Good afternoon to you, Mrs Le Burn,' said the old man. 'And thank you for coming today.' My mother pushed her finger into my side and motioned with her head towards Mr Moloney.

'Good afternoon, Mr Moloney,' I said.

'Good afternoon, Zac. How are you today?'

'OK.'

Miss Moloney had come in behind us and a heavy silence settled on the room. She broke it in a slow half shout, 'Father, Zac has something to say to you.'

Dammit. I had my apology all worked out to play on a lady's sympathies. Not an old man. This old man, any man, wouldn't care about my bad paper run, the southerly and Mrs Whiteman's favourites. A man would say buck up and stop whining. I could feel my mother staring at me, her face braced. She gave a couple of quick flicks with her head. I stepped forward and to the side, trying to stand where Mr Moloney was looking.

Copying his daughter I slowly shouted at him, 'I am sorry that I ran through your garden. It was the wrong thing to do and I will not do it again.'

'It did give me quite a start when Pamela came through the house madly shouting. I thought the world was coming to an end.' He paused and then said with a half smile, 'Turned out that there was a child in the garden.'

'I'm also sorry, Mr Moloney. I've punished Zac and he's had a chance to think about what he's done, I am sure it won't happen again,' said Mum. 'Now, we won't be keeping--'

Before Mum could finish, Mr Moloney's daughter interrupted her in that same no-choice voice, 'Now Mrs Le Burn, if I could speak to you alone.'

'Is that necessary? I think we have--' Mum said, more hopeful than certain we were going to escape.

'Please come to the kitchen. It won't take but a minute.'

My mother's face was ready to pop, though her eyes were resigned. She looked at me as if to say, 'See what you've done' but replied, 'Of course, Miss Moloney.'

As they left, the door swung closed behind them. I stood still and tried to listen to what was going on in the kitchen. I could hear muffled voices, a jug being put on, cupboard doors opening and closing, the sounds of a cup of tea being made: I was going to be here a while. I looked across at Mr Moloney. He was still sitting there, his eyes looking at nothing, his head cocked, listening to me.

I stood, and he sat, in silence except for his heavy and loud breathing. He sounded like he'd run a mile. His only movement was his fingers fiddling with the cuffs of his shirt. He did it three times on each side before he finally said, 'I know you use my garden to get home. I don't mind. Makes no difference to me.'

'But your daughter ...' I said surprised.

'Yes, she minds. Don't know why but she does. Best not to do it if she's here. But otherwise, do as you wish.'

'OK,' was all I could think to say.

I could hear what sounded like crying in the kitchen and I hoped it wasn't Mum. I listened harder. I could hear the soothing shushing sound Mum makes when I cry.

'Pamela's crying. She's done a lot of that since she got here,' Mr Moloney said. 'She's worried about me. She usually does it at night, when she thinks I can't hear. Actually she thinks I'm deaf. Don't know why. I haven't the heart to tell her I'm not as she's been shouting at me since she got here. Been shouting at me for years in actual fact.'

Adults crying makes me nervous.

'OK.'

'See my wife died a while back. I haven't been coping very well. Can't really see. So when Pamela got here she was shocked at the state of the house. And of me.'

An adult crying and a dead wife rooted me to the spot, unable to work out where to look or what to say.

After a while I said, 'OK.'

'Do you say anything other than OK?' asked Mr Moloney.

'Yes,' I said. He smiled at this so I added, 'Sometimes.' He laughed a little. Listening, I could hear more crying, my mother still cooing and the jug going on again.

'She usually pulls herself together after twenty minutes or so. It won't be long,' Mr Moloney explained.

'OK.'

'Can you read?'

'Of course, I'm ten.'

'Sorry, of course you can. Can you see last night's paper anywhere? It's probably over there in one of Pamela's new piles.'

I walked over to the closest stack of rolled *Evening Posts* and there was yesterday's sitting on top.

'Yeah, it's here. Would you like it?'

'Not much use to me. Can't see to read it. Do you think you could read it to me? While you wait for your mother.'

I don't read the paper; I deliver it.

'I suppose.'

'Great, pull up a chair.'

I read 'The Evening Post, Saturday the sixteenth of March, 1968' from the top right corner. I waited unsure of what to do, unsure of what to read next.

Then I asked, 'What'd you want me to read?'

'Read the headlines. If I want you to keep reading, I'll say.'

'The Evening Post ...'

'I think we can skip that bit.'

I looked at the front page for the next darkest, biggest words. I decided to read 'Fiery George Brown Walks Out' and waited.

'No, not that,' said Mr Moloney. 'What next?'

I looked again. Next darkest and biggest was probably 'New Zealander Finds He is Alien at "Home"'.

'That sounds good,' said Mr Moloney straight away, so I started reading the story.

*Whatever the official policy about immigration of Commonwealth citizens, it has been made very clear in the last week that many Britons do not want New Zealanders to be summarily evicted when their approved period of residence expires. Mr Jim Eagles, 23,*

*a journalist, has received hundreds of letters, all but one sympathetic, since he was informed by the British authorities early this year that he must leave Britain when his present visitor's visa expires in June.*

*Mr Eagles, who formerly worked for the New Zealand Herald came to Britain early in 1967 and got a job on the Evening Argus in Brighton. He believed, on the basis of what he had been told when he received his entry visa, that he could stay as long as he liked. But when he sought an extension of his visa he was told that the circumstances had changed.*

*Mr Eagles wrote the story up in his newspaper under the heading 'I am being Booted out of "Home"' and made the point that to many New Zealanders Britain was still home.*

At that moment, I was aware that my mother and Mr Moloney's daughter were standing in the doorway watching me. Mr Moloney's daughter was looking at me with a mixture of surprise and gratefulness. Mum just looked surprised.

'Come on, you. We're going. Nice to meet you, Mr Moloney.'

I stood up and got to the door but my mother was again flicking her head at Mr Moloney. I turned and said, 'Bye, Mr Moloney.'

'They're leaving,' Mr Moloney's daughter half shouted.

Ignoring his daughter, Mr Moloney said, 'Thank you both for popping over, have a safe walk home.'

The daughter walked us to the door. My mother gave her a hug, which I thought odd, and said 'Pamela, I'll call you later. It's all going to be fine.'

'I know, I know it is. How could it have got this bad? I should have done more ...' She stopped herself, took a deep breath and said to Mum, 'I'll wait for your call.'

When we got to the bottom of the steps my mother took my hand. We don't hold hands much any more but it felt nice. We walked a few houses in silence, till Mum said, 'Did you like Mr Moloney?'

'Sure.'

'Did you notice he was blind and deaf?'

'He's not deaf. His daughter only thinks he is. He breathes really noisily. And a lot.'

‘Yes, he’s old. He has trouble breathing sometimes. And his wife’s just died.’ Mum stopped, squeezed my hand and we walked a couple of houses further on. Then she continued, ‘So he’s all alone and not many people come to see him any more. His daughter lives down in Christchurch so she can’t come often. She’s very worried about him.’

‘Is that why she was crying?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’ After a while she asked, ‘How much could you hear?’

‘Nothing really. Only the crying.’

‘Well, while we were talking we came up with an idea of how you could help.’

I didn’t like the sound of this. Some people like to help but I’m not one of them. I like to muck around and helping is the exact opposite of mucking around. This sounded like Mum was trying to add to her punishment arsenal. I needed to end this. Fast. I stopped walking and looked at Mum. ‘I said sorry. That’s what we agreed. And I’ve been grounded. And I’ve been thinking about what I did and I’m going to be better.’

Mum looked at me like I’d said something funny. ‘Yes, that is all very good. But Pamela and I had the idea that you might read the paper to Mr Moloney, only for half an hour or so, after you’ve finished your run. Then we came in and you were already doing it. Perfect, eh?’

I thought it sucked. I thought it was really unfair. Unfair that Mum and Mr Moloney’s daughter both sat in the kitchen and cooked this up. I lose thirty minutes on six days. That’s 180 minutes a week they’ll steal from me. And reading the paper is boring. And the house smells. Worst, I’ve already been punished. I am about to say all of this when I look at my mother and the words stick in my throat. She is expecting me to do this, she expects me to be helpful and nice.

‘OK,’ is all I can say.

We walk home. Mum is happy I am being nice. I am happy I made her happy. But I’m not so happy about my new punishment.