

THE ESCAPE

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HOW I LEARNED TO RUN



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I have the smartest dog in the world. His name is Alan, and he understands human language. He does whatever I tell him. Whenever he looks at me, I know what he's thinking. I spend a lot of time with him, so I'm familiar with his every expression and every wag of his tail. Recently he's been learning to speak. He always warns me when there's something going on nearby. And he helps me with math too.

I once met a similar dog on my way home from school, but it didn't have Alan's black spot behind its ear. I bent down to it. I just wanted to pet it. The dog bared its teeth and jumped on me. I stumbled, which gave it enough time to bite my ankle. I ran as fast as I could, but it followed me. It snapped at me again right before a ditch. I finally managed to shake it after I ran behind some bushes. The angry growling grew distant. Just to be safe, I kept on running, though at a much slower pace. I didn't stop until I reached our street. When I passed my hand over my ankle and the back of my leg, they hurt, and my fingers were covered in blood. I hobbled the rest of the way home.

My father cleaned my wound and told me it was nothing. He said I should learn to run. If I had run faster, no harm would have come to me. A child must know how to run. Back then I had no idea how right he was. But I did take his words to heart.

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The next morning I began my training. My leg still hurt, but I put all of my energy into running. I ran from our house all the way to the gardens. I had to stop there so I wouldn't trample the vegetables. It was all I had in me anyway.

After that I started to run every day. At first I ran once around the house, then twice. I ran to the end of our street and back. Later I made it all the way to the forest, and finally, I ran a loop around the whole neighborhood. Alan always zipped alongside me. Early on I panted and perspired, but I felt good about myself because I could run farther each time. Every day I set myself a longer route. A month later I was able to run several loops around the neighborhood. At some point I stopped counting, I just wanted to be faster each time. Some people watched me with bewilderment, and a few neighborhood boys laughed at me, but I paid no attention to them. I thought to myself: Just wait until you have to race me! I knew that with my training none of my peers would outrun me. And the whole time I thought about what my father had said, that being able to run fast was the most important thing a child needed to know.



LET'S GO!

One day a very strange thing happened in our country. A few people came down with a peculiar illness. They were constantly hungry. Hunger gnawed at them even though there was plenty of food – the fields were producing, the hens were laying, and the cows were giving milk as usual. They should have been content. But all of a sudden it wasn't enough for them; they kept wanting more. They simply couldn't eat their fill.

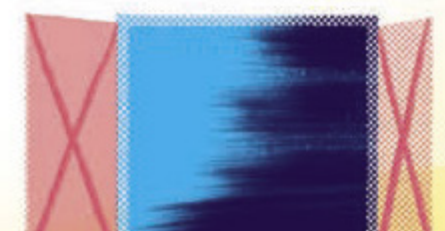
In the morning, for instance, a person with this illness would eat a pot of meat with beans, followed by ten ears of roasted corn, but a moment later he'd be as hungry as if he had just woken up and not had a bite to eat. Naturally, he'd go through his supplies in no time. Afterwards he'd do nothing but search out more things to eat, and his mounting hunger would make him angry. He'd go to his neighbors, take their food and gorge on it, and raid other people's kitchens and granaries. No one would try to stop him for fear of coming to a bad end.

We noticed there were more and more people like that in our town. They were getting bigger all the time. Some were as large as hippos or elephants, and the more they ate, the hungrier they got. They couldn't think about anything but other people's food anymore, and they became more dangerous with each passing

day. Once I peeked out from behind a corner and saw a really huge monster on the square. It could have eaten the hippo it resembled, except there were no hippos to be had anywhere, so it was feeding in a grocery warehouse instead. It downed several sacks of barley without bothering to make porridge, followed that with three crates of tomatoes, and washed it all down with a keg of beer. The shop clerks had to run for their lives because the monster looked like it wanted to eat them too.

When it was done eating, it carelessly wiped its mouth and immediately started to look for another house to raid. The monster was so full it could have burst, and when it stepped out toward the old marketplace, that was exactly what happened. Its body exploded in every direction. The tiny bits came to life immediately. They looked like infants, but they had teeth and walked like adults. Right away they spread out and ate everything in their path. They grew quickly, and soon they filled the whole town.

A banging sound woke me up early one morning. The noise was coming from the courtyard. Three giant figures were rushing toward our house. It was time to show the world how I had learned to run.




An illustration of a tropical beach scene. In the foreground, a man in a red shirt and blue shorts stands with a young boy in a yellow shirt and blue shorts. They are surrounded by several penguins of various colors (black, white, blue, red). A dog is sitting on the sand. In the background, there are palm trees, a wooden pier extending into the water, and a building with a thatched roof. The sky is a mix of yellow and blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

TO THE MUTE VILLAGE AND ACROSS THE RIVER

8 I took off like lightning. My father and Alan could barely keep up. I had to stop several times to let them catch up with me. Running felt good, and I was glad I had trained so hard. At times we slowed down, but we kept running even when we didn't hear anyone following us. We had run a great distance and none of us had any energy left, but my father said that sitting around was for wimps, so we slowed down to a walk and rested that way. We alternated between running and walking until nightfall.

At sunset we stopped beneath a guava tree. It would have been a shame to let all of the guava fall to the ground and rot. I ate four or five of the sweet juicy fruits. My father also had some, and he put a few in our bag for later. Only Alan didn't seem to care for them. When he's hungry, he always manages to find something for himself. According to my father we had just found an ideal place for sleep, so we lay down. I asked him when we'd be going back home. He said that since we were already so far away, we should make use of the opportunity and take a look around. After all, we had no idea what was on the other side of the river that was shimmering off in the distance in the last rays of the setting sun. We'd investigate, and then we could tell everyone about it once we made it back to town.

An illustration of a person in a small boat on a river. The person is wearing a blue shirt and a hat. The river is calm, and the sky is a mix of yellow and blue. In the background, there are palm trees and a building with a thatched roof. The water reflects the sky and the trees.

9 I slept well until a monster appeared in my dream, and I was glad I woke up. We had more guava for breakfast, and then we set out toward the valley. No one was following us. I felt like we were on a great adventure, and I couldn't wait to see what we'd find in that unknown place. A few hours later we reached the river, but the current was very strong there, so we walked along the riverbank. We made it to a fishing village where everyone was as silent as the grave. They didn't have music playing on the village square, in the restaurants, or at the market. Everything was quiet, and people gave us gloomy stares. The only cheerful being around was my dog who had caught a carp in the shallows and was beside himself with joy.

I had never experienced such silence. It was as if everyone had become mute. They plodded along, barely putting one foot in front of the other, and didn't answer my father's questions. We didn't feel comfortable there, so we decided it'd be best to take the ferry across the river.

My father didn't have his ID with him, so we had to pay double. The ferry ride was incredible. I could have ridden back and forth for days. But before I knew it we were on the other side, in the other world.



IN THE CITY OF DANCE

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We really liked the first city on the other side of the river. It had taken us two days to get there. The people were friendly and kept smiling at us. One of the vendors at the market invited us to his house, and his wife gave us something to eat. She made great pancakes and porridge and offered us all kinds of fruit. Then they brought out their musical instruments and showed us how they dance. Their bodies moved in a wavelike motion, but their heads stayed still, except that the dancers rolled their eyes in funny ways. Little by little a crowd of musicians gathered in the courtyard, bringing with them drums, horns, whistles, balafons, and rattles, and they played all the songs they knew. In turn my father sang them a song we like in our village, and they thought it was terribly amusing. One of the musicians was the local magician. He asked me if I had a wish. The first thought that went through my head was that I wanted to be the fastest runner in the world, but then I realized no one could catch up with me anyway and I had everything I needed. I told him to save his magic for someone else. I didn't need anything from him. I was happy listening to the music and being with my father and Alan. They offered us to spend the night. As we were headed to bed, my father and I agreed we would enjoy living in that city.

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The next day we were invited to visit a different house. But on our way there we saw frightened people running toward the forest. They yelled for us to turn back. We could hear gunfire and the roar of engines, and we saw smoke rising off in the distance. We found a place to hide just in the nick of time. Through the blinds I caught a glimpse of legs in high boots, but my father pulled me away and out the back door, and we made a run for it together with the locals. The children who had danced with us the night before were running behind me. I slowed down so they could catch up to me. Since they had taught me to dance so well, I repaid them by helping them improve their running technique. I showed them how to relax their arms and lean forward. I explained what size steps to take and how to breathe to keep going as long as possible. Three steps, breathe in, three steps, breathe out. No clenched fists, it wastes energy. If they ran fast enough, no harm would come to them.

About ten of us were running together. We stopped on the hill behind the forest and looked back. Several houses were on fire and the streets were deserted. It was not a pretty sight. It became clear they didn't have a place to go back to, so we ran on.



VISITING THE PEOPLE WITH MANY ARMS

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We traveled like animals on the savannah, like elephants, zebras, antelopes, or wildebeests in search of water and grass. A week later we reached a city that was nothing like the City of Dance from which we came. Not only was there no music, but we also couldn't find any place to eat. The people who lived there had no intention of sharing anything with us, and they weren't willing to sell us food either.

At the center of town there was a marketplace with a big sign that read, "Miser's Market." We mingled in with the crowd and started to look over the merchandise displayed on the tables. There were all kinds of fruit – bananas, oranges, avocados, mangoes, pineapples, papaya, and many others I didn't recognize. My mouth watered, and I wanted to have some. But the vendors saw we weren't from there, and they wanted so much money for ordinary corn, we couldn't afford it. We decided to leave that cursed place.


On our way out I noticed why the locals seemed strange to me. They were wearing beautiful clothing, long robes and neatly ironed dresses of every color, and expensive jewelry in their hair, around their necks, and on their wrists. But some of them had one, two, or even three extra arms. They used one pair of arms to protect their things from their thieving neighbors, and with the rest of their

limbs they grabbed as much as they could for themselves from the tables and the pockets of those same neighbors. I saw more than one set of people get stuck with intertwined arms as they tried to steal something from each other. They got all tangled up, and others had to come separate them. That was followed by yelling, slapping, and whacking each other's heads with bare hands.

This is not a place I'd want to live, my father said, and the people from the City of Dance agreed with him. We decided to keep going north. We believed things had to be better there, besides which, if we had spent another day at Miser's Market, we would have lost our minds.

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A boy, his father, and their dog, Alan, set off unwillingly on a journey, after a strange illness afflicts their hometown. They long to find a place to settle in peace and quiet, but this seems out of reach. Wandering through cities, villages and countries they encounter help and friendship, but also different kinds of prejudice and rejection. This colourful, magical realism story, with its exotic backdrops, evokes not only tales of Africa, but the fantastic adventures of Sindbad, while remaining relevant to the contemporary world.

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