



Ted Jenner

Arthur's Pass



EBK 6
A Titus e-Book

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1

It's the hour in autumn, just after the equinox, when the long shadows of the rhubarb leaves creep down your garden path like the tendrils of a marrow. The silver lining of a snail's wake catches the late afternoon rays on the steps at the end of the path, and even a jogger's footprints are clearly visible in the scoria grit freshly sprinkled on the footpaths of your street.

Ball and plantar arch are clearly marked as the thick-soled running shoes make contact with the ground, the weight is carried along the outside edge of the foot then transferred to the ball in preparation for lift-off with the big toe, and suddenly the surface of the pavement appears to be very fine-grained under your arches, it's almost like sand or silt, thinks Arthur, striding out with a pronounced jack-knife at the knees (right shank drawn up behind him almost to the horizontal) yet feeling nonetheless that he's operating in slow-motion, as if waiting for the next print to appear before his right shoe can make contact with the ground once again.

East along Waitemata Street, turn right at the corner, climb up New Street, right again into Harbour Terrace, then a left up into St. Mary's Road and another left into Ashley Avenue where the climb is over, the first S (inverted) is almost complete, and you are already treading a second S (regular) into the pavement, retracing your steps in reverse order with lefts at New Street and Harbour Terrace followed by rights at St. Mary's Road and Waitemata Street – and so on since this whole configuration can be repeated several times over. Now two S's, regular and inverted,

continually merging into one another, looping the loop, eventually describe a figure of eight, to wit the symbol of infinity, thinks Arthur, wryly reflecting that for some there is always a mountain over the hills, or an island in the ocean, or a river in the garden, which they might not reach in their dreams but which they felt to be somewhere at the edge of them; whereas for Arthur there was only this uphill and downdale labyrinth of his own making in which fellow joggers, intending to advance to the next line to keep up with him, are first led up the garden path and then out into a maze of streets by Arthur the authorial until well after nightfall, whereupon they usually give up the chase as entirely fruitless and unproductive.

Stressed, unstressed and pause, stressed. The right foot makes contact with the ground, a print reappears and with it the feeling that there's someone near at hand controlling every movement – your running shoes constantly reappearing and vanishing as they alternately advance and retreat, your arms describing short, parallel, almost identical strokes which oscillate side by side in opposite directions, your shoulders hunched, head bent forward for the first hill climb, then head up, eyes right for the embroidered lace curtain pulled back from a corner of the living-room window at 19 Harbour Terrace – everything so far under control as you unfold the rhythm of your passage past those who wait for your passage to pass, heads up, eyes left, counting your footsteps, the schoolgirl returns to her homework spread out over the dining-room table at 33; a hand retaps the barometer in the hallway at 35; male, fiftyish, resumes his examination of something he holds close to his eyes – flashes of purple and silvery light illuminating his cheeks and forehead – at 39.

Everything under control then, and Arthur feeling both in and

under control. Add a little mystery to a street at a quarter to six, and did those feet achieve as much in adolescence with a half second for each step, a step and a half for each metre, eighty metres a minute? Wry Arthur consoles himself, he who always had the time ticking at his wrist to give another in his need, but rarely finding another in his need, set himself to time the body he had maintained for forty-eight years, even if each unexplained bruise on its surface only served to remind him of the little he knew about its very superficialities. And now even the disposition of the bones in his legs and feet was a distant memory of Anthropology 1, AU, November 1966, when he ran three blocks in Morning-side every evening before finals, up Warwick Street laying a set of bones at every second gate, turn left into Bannerman Road, the tarsus at 42, metatarsus at 46, phalanges at 50 – some of the foot is coming back, notes loping *homo habilis*, the mnemonic is working twenty-nine years too late (wry, wry) but the print reappears and Arthur is still running for his life.

Up St. Mary's Road, light folding inside the encroaching darkness, a powdery orange sundown with wisps and flakes, curled shavings of cloud on the north-west horizon; turn left into Ashley Avenue with the last slanting rays, your running shoes scuffing the scoria grit at this hour of the equinox making your prints harder to read right to left, east to west, down Ashley Avenue in the half-dark, porch light flicks on at 24 in time for your approach, couple on the verandah at 28 turn sharply in unison to avoid your eyes left, striped drape falls back across a corner of the bedroom window at 30 – so far not much more than a faint echo of last night, though the footsteps closing up behind you sound a new note, a slightly mechanical stride that could almost be your own, or the echo of your own, but you don't look round, back on track with the right shank straightening for the toe-strike, you almost missed the

hand with the delicately hooked index finger at the window, corner of Ashley Avenue and New Street, inscribing a message there in a patch of condensation for you or your pursuer perhaps, but quickly, right to left with the letters in reverse so that inscriber's verso would be your recto if you had the time to stop and read the message left to right obversely, or at least the first four words grasped almost subliminally – if there was no-one at your heels, your name wasn't Arthur, you didn't have another six figures of eight to retrace before 6.15, and you weren't already running down New Street, scattering the fragments of a revised version of your songline back down the echoes of your footsteps.

2

Yvonne

With her knees tucked tightly against her breasts, she is rocking gently backwards and forwards on her rounded back when she hears the footsteps of someone running down the street, a sound so threatening to her in this prone position that she picks herself up off her bedroom floor immediately... And there she is at the kitchen window, a shock of tousled auburn hair, the fingertips of one hand spread out on the pane and flattening into a family of minute moon-shaped faces growing paler by the second until suddenly withdrawn.

Now that her concentration has vanished, she runs an index finger over the condensation on the window and a tree-fern appears, rather like the one she'd keep in the living-room if she had the space, something she could water and nurture if there weren't so many restrictions.

For the time being, Yvonne is content to sketch the delicate fronds of a mamaku on the misted window. But even before the phone rings, beads of condensation run down the roots of her tree to the window sash, converting her fern into a banyan thrashing wildly in a tropical cyclone.

She's reached a decision, however. A cobra posture first. Then a shoulder-stand, at least when the phone has stopped ringing. Again she resists the temptation to answer it. 'Don't move!' – the inner voice is nagging her now. 'No, no, you're moving.' Just one step, that's all, and the runner can be heard directly beneath her window. It's the loping, mechanical stride she heard a few minutes ago, last night in fact and the night before, the stride she's heard perhaps for as much as a week. 'So let's take a look,' the voice suggests and now she's moving.

With a few deft strokes of her fingertips, she clears a patch of condensation on the pane and discovers him, the head turned back, one hand raised to shade the eyes as he catches sight of her (but wasn't that a wave of recognition?). She notes trim beard and gold-rimmed spectacles when the head bobs for an instant between her thumb and forefinger, loses itself behind her palm, reappears at the little finger, suddenly turns the corner and passes down the road behind her neighbour's hedge.

Baffled by the apparent wave, she switches the kettle on and sinks to the floor, lying flat on her stomach. 'Breathe out ... bend elbows ... lift ... slowly ... that's it.' The voice and its memoranda persist even when the phone interrupts her cobra posture, her eyes fixed on a small pear-shaped indentation in the ceiling directly above her head. She has to admit that the face is still a mystery, much more so than the identity of the caller 'who will ...

inhale ... remain nameless ... slowly ... if it's who ... that's it!
...you think it is.'

Not surprising then if her right hand, reaching up, lifts the receiver off its cradle and replaces it carefully on the serving bench. Gerry's voice is struggling to squeeze out of the receiver's sixteen pinhole apertures in as many vermiform coils, thin and wriggling. The hand rejoins its partner at the hips to support a half-shoulder-stand, and then it's the tread of running shoes further back down the street, a little confused at first before the unmistakable pattern of that long stride establishes itself.

'Kettle! God!' Just in time. Its gently gushing burble was buried under all this white noise, and the window has misted over again with the ghostly lineaments of her mamaku still intact and a concatenation of large letters discernible above the fronds of her fern, a message in upper case partially effacing Tuesday's *the goddess is at large and magic is afoot* and printed backwards on the condensation in one of her many attempts to communicate with the street.

She retraces the letters with her fingertip, recalling the message now, having inscribed it less than a week ago for her landlady's benefit. 'God! Well, that just about explains everything, doesn't it? So that's it ... of course ... why he keeps coming back and peering up at the window.'

Footsteps! Still one or two houses back. She quickly runs the palm of her hand over the message, obliterating it. Backing away, she senses eyes trained on the window, the head raised and turned hard left as before. Yvonne faces a more disturbing problem now, though. It's getting dark in the street. Should she switch off the kitchen light? ... and would she see him any more clearly?

Or should she confront him with her presence at the window?
... even if she can't see him at all?

Safer perhaps to find another posture for the moment, contemplate the strangeness of her body's shape in the darkness – so that some form of enlightenment can steal over this particular half-lotus from the base of her spine and she can become the coiled vessel in which everything around her is happening?

No such luck. She can still hear the peculiar timbre of Gerry's voice on the bench, quavering and plaintive as if he was pouring rebuke after rebuke into his dictaphone, each point catalogued and coded, of course; then, when Gerry falls silent at last, the repetitious thump of those padded soles – the pace redoubled and obsessed this time, she could swear.

Head on the floor and cupped in both hands, back planted firmly against the kitchen wall, legs half bent, the thighs parallel with the floor, the shanks parallel with the wall, the soles of her feet turned towards the ceiling, Yvonne's problem for the next forty-five seconds is relatively straightforward: how long can she hold this posture?

... if only it was that simple, yet there really isn't any alternative but to ignore him and resume the half-headstand if Marathon Man won't vanish and he'll be back in his usual five minutes to take another peek, his stride faltering as he peers up at the window only to see the strokes and curlicues of all her former messages streaming down the pane. Each script is now as illegible as her landlady's latest instruction sellotaped to the kitchen table ('Please defrost fridge as soon as poss. – Beryl'), the vowels of which she has already converted into a string of marguerite daisies. And he's certainly not going to get anything more out of her

for his troubles tonight when she has effectively denied herself any form of communication not only with the street below but with the outside world full stop.

Even so, she can't resist removing the last remaining patch of condensation on the windowpane just left of centre. Its general resemblance to South America hasn't escaped her; she runs her index finger around the coastline of the humid and unstable sub-continent before erasing it – and there's her face reflected in the pane against the darkness of the street, stray tufts of hair trickling back across her brow and right eye as the hand supporting her head gradually releases them. It often amuses her to associate this luminous twin with her inner voice, and the two of them will even converse in certain distracting situations, though the silence between them can be just as significant. Tonight, for instance, in the silence which finally extends to running shoes ('... at last ... thank God'), there are doubts and hesitations which will never pass their lips, not because they're on such intimate terms but because they've only just decided to keep certain recurring features of Marathon Man and use them in the next chapter of their novel. The resolution ends abruptly in an Om sounded with the lips partially closed, which produces a faint humming noise and, on the pane, a small circular patch of condensation opaque enough to dissolve the twin whose voice had just started to nag her once again.

3

He fits her description

So here you are at last with your long loping stride shadowing mine, that much closer this time following the line of my prints,

line after line with a pause at the end for the next print to appear even if you don't have much of a clue about where all this is heading (you can guess you must be helping me redefine the Earth's curvature at least; at least you must be well on the way to wherever I'm going)

You're so close now you're almost at my heels, but I don't look round, used to having someone at my back only to lose him soon enough somewhere deep in the figure of eight, up and down and around and up and down and a... there's her message: I KNOW YOUR SECRET this time without the redhead, but whose secret or what's the secret, if it's a secret or anyone's business

get the rhythm right, what are you doing to the rhythm, clockwise and anticlockwise, dextrogyre and widdershins, left at New Street, left again at Harbour Terrace, you must know the stations of your peregrination by now, or is it a case of body maintained at an average weight for almost fifty years only to range no further in a day than a spoilt Pekinese, head down, paws scraping the backs of our hands, toes scuffing the calluses of our heels

find your stride, unwind the rhythm of your passage, smoothly now, head up, shoulders firm, that's more like it, past the cabbage tree at 33 rustling in the wind as the sixteen year old looks up from her homework at the sound of our footsteps, curled strands of brown hair drifting over the forehead when we're already at 39, violet and silver coruscations flashing over the furniture and wallpaper, two small heads at the window turning with the regular pace of our stride, then nothing before the corner but swaying curtains

and our shadows under the streetlights swaying in unison, each of us simultaneously alone and the same, our running shoes and our

striped T-shirts, our wind-blown hair and our airy privacy, just the two of us stark against the horizon, powdery orange light on pearly creamsud clouds, slats of a Venetian blind blinking into the vertical as we ease into the homestretch for the seventh time

and beyond, you don't stop, no, and you won't ever stop, damn you, line after dotted line down Waitemata Street and the long slow curve up New Street past tree and shrub and stone and sand in wind and darkness day and night for some the Islands of the Blessed, for others (the hills up ahead, the islands at their back) the four-fold rhythm, fifty-four muscles straining with each step, a step and a half for each metre – and all for what, rearranging a little loose grit down the length of New Street to relieve the night sweats, migraine, dry mouth, chest pains, stomach cramps, nausea and nerves? Or is it serious: depression, clammy hands, loss of libido, fear of loneliness or (the irony of it!) fear of getting close?

come on, you can tell me, old pal, *hypocrite lecteur*, following me right to the end of the line in the half-dark at nightfall when the wind is almost still and only particles of grit churn in our wake down Harbour Terrace, the leaves of the cabbage tree fall limp and the pert sixteen year old has left the dining-room table to its cosines and tangents, three small heads suddenly bob down beneath the living-room window at 39 and then the cobalt glow of the laptop at 43 where the fingers wait for the footsteps to pass before resuming their brisk little dance on the keys

or have I already said too much for you to guess where all this might lead, but winding the knotted cord into the palm of your hand and sensing there's an Ariadne in thin-soled plimsolls at the other end of the thread, you follow on at my shoulder blade, your

feet in my footprints half a second later making an uncannily close fit and right on track to find, on the kitchen table, at the very end of the long, thin thread, a note saying, 'Sorry, it's just not going to work – Alison'

better then to stick to a rhythm, dropping a bone at every second doorstep, left at St. Mary's Road, left again at Ashley Avenue, the silvery-blue screens casting their flickering lights and snatches of dialogue in 14 and 16, the young couple on the verandah at 28 still turning in unison to avoid our gaze, and then the hand at the window of the corner house wiping the pane clear of moisture and there she is, the thick mane of dark red hair and the delicate hand waving, almost beckoning me in to share a secret

so why are we still running, for God's sake, you keep running and I'm still running with a third footfall audible now in the half-dark, turning down New Street, three in tandem, my shadow and his shadow persistent in the pearls and suds of dusk fading behind the fishbone tree beyond Harbour Terrace, whose secret then, mine or yours or his too if it's anyone's secret now, all three of us, Shadrach, Lovelock and Abrahams, listening to footsteps, the curtains pulled and swaying on either side of the street listening to footsteps, footsteps that can be distinguished from all the other footsteps falling on the city's streets more or less carelessly, more or less meaningfully this evening, three sets of footsteps

and not one of us daring to look back for fear his shadow might vanish in the blink of a Venetian blind, nothing left of it in the streetlights but the whorl of a toe or the half-moon of a heel, Shadrach and Abrahams gone to ground with scant evidence for posterity of a lighter pelvis, a stooped scapula, a slighter thigh-bone, fibula friable as the patella, soft, worn down into the

crumbs of shinbone after years of running to the footfalls of their forbears, soon even

reaching the point where they're beginning to run despite/without/outside themselves now down St. Mary's into Waitemata for the ninth time arms legs heart lungs pumping despite the signals the 'won't ever stop will you damn you' muttered by each to his own unrelenting shadow as he turns into the long slow curve up New Street right eardrum blocked by a raging torrent in its veins the ache persisting into level ground at Harbour Terrace where the windows become visible from the street once again but right ear throbbing now as the lace curtain at 19 is drawn back to the window-frame dining-room light still on at 33 but nobody there balding male at 39 chasing three children into the garden with a remote in one hand fingers still glowing in the cobalt at 43

St. Mary's Road 400 metres from the redhead and her secret the shadows racing ahead trifurcated at the first streetlight Abrahams edging up and out on his own three metres in front ear throbbing someone dark and faceless still pressing at your heels no way to relieve a depression now is it sir Ashley Avenue less than 250 metres from target bluish fluorescence of the angels reading the news at 14 and 16 porch light flicks on again at 24 couple on verandah at 28 swing round suddenly to face you Dimplecheeks in French beret and Stubblecrop showing you two fingers striped drape snatched into a corner of the window at 30 and nothing nothing again? At 34 NOTHING

but beads of condensation streaming down her window and the two of us in single file, following the line of prints with a brief pause at the end of each line, myself and shadow turning into New Street with another pass tomorrow night reserved for Yvonne as

I call her now, main item of tonight's scheduled fiction, theme of the chance encounter in the suburbs at dusk, slice of life without resolution *ad infinitum* in line after line of a small cramped hand on fox-marked paper, Arthur alone descending New Street, ear-ache gradually fading, the compressed tread of his running shoes forming the soles of an upside down jogger, his head buried deep in the earth, the pebbles pouring in purity through his throbbing eardrum as he passes down a stratum his ancestors might have trod in another distant millennium, on another distant island, until the sentence he began concludes in its prescribed form, the arm falls back and the leg completes its stride.



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