

RUNNING  
By B. J. Campbell

Why bother to walk when I can run? Running saves time. The faster my nine-year-old legs can carry me, the sooner I earn my five cents, the price of a Spearmint Bubble Gum five-pack or a Babe Ruth chocolate bar.

The sure way to deserve my nickel is to carry milk from Grisman's farm to Jim Chambers, my teacher. To squeeze everything into my morning schedule, I leave early, sprint over to Grisman's, down the road on my roundabout rush to Newman School. The usual gallon of fresh milk is always waiting there at Grisman's for me and my fast feet to transport.

I can also count on Grisman's Border collie hiding under the porch or behind some bush to try to bite me in the face.

I've never done anything bad to that dog, but he hates me anyway. Today, like any other day, I merely churn out of the timber between our house and Grisman's and across the meadow that takes me up to their front porch. As I start up the stairs, a black and white streak charges out from under the hay wagon, growling and kicking up pine needles and dirt as he gains traction. Snarling, he backs me up the porch stairs to where the gallon of milk waits beside the screen door.

He barks louder and faster when I reach for the milk. Then he lunges, and closes his jaws over my coat sleeve on my right forearm.

“Fang!” Mr. Grisman bellows from inside the house. “Fang! Stop it! Shut that up, you worthless mutt!” The moment the dog backs off for another run at me, the man appears in the doorway holding a hammer. Today, he beats that Border collie with the hammer, just like he did yesterday. I grab the milk and run with it.

The collie’s yelps reach my ears as I race down the dirt lane toward the road.

Grudgingly, I slow down enough to make sure the lid is on the milk tight so more won't slop out on the way. Quickly with my pointer finger, I sample the heavy cream where it has leaked around the waxed paper underneath the lid and run down the outside of the jar. Then I shift the sloshing container to a better grip on my right arm for fast moving. My arm is starting to smart where the dog bit me.

The milk and I careen around curves, across gullies, dodging stumps and bushes cross-country. When I screech to a reasonable walk near my teacher's front door, it surprises me that the seasick milk hasn't transformed into butter like I've seen Mom make. I hold the jar up with one arm and my knee while I knock on the door with my almost free hand.

"Good morning, Bob!" Mr. Chambers swings the door wide so I can come in. "Here, I'll take that. It's just in time for breakfast, too. Here's your salary." He places the nickel in my outstretched palm and my fingers close around it.

"Thanks, Mr. Chambers."

I turn to speed away to school, but Mr. Chambers says, “Bob, did you hurt your arm? Looks like it may be bleeding a little.”

He peeks at the small wound under my ripped sleeve while I tell him about the Border collie that has it in for me.

“This must be terrible for you every day, Bob,” he murmurs as he cleans off the wound with soap and water and applies a light bandage.

“Oh, he doesn’t always bite me,” I say. “He tries, but usually I escape.”

“Is he guarding something? What are you usually doing each time he attacks you?” he wants to know.

“Running. Just running!” That sounds harmless enough for me. In fact, my feet are ready to go now. “Thanks for the bandage, Mr. Chambers. I’ll see you over at the school in a few minutes.”

I fly like the wind to the school play yard with my nickel in my pants pocket, planning a quick get away for the moment school is out this afternoon.

When we are finally dismissed after those endless hours of waiting, I catapult out the school door and shift into my smoothest cruising speed toward the south. I dodge many of the same bushes I missed this morning as I run back on the route that will take me past home, past Grisman's, clear over to Garfield Bay two miles down to the lake, where the treats wait for me at Sam Miller’s store. I’ve had all day to make up my mind which it will be: a five-pack of Spearmint Bubble Gum, good for hours of chewing, popping pleasure; or a Babe Ruth candy bar, which will disappear much more quickly but is still worth the wait.

As I near Grisman’s lane, it seems only natural to evade the dog that bit me this morning. For a split second, Mr. Chambers’ question comes to my mind again about what I am doing when this dog nails me. “Running.” I had said, “Running.” OK, so what’s my other choice? Stay and let an angry, sharp-toothed animal eat me? I see him right now, loping up the lane from

the house toward me with his head lowered, looking at me from under his eyebrows like he's about to cut a cow out of the herd.

My heart pounds. My feet say, "RUN!" But what will happen if I don't run? If I walk instead, will he just catch up to me quicker?

On the main road, at the end of the lane, I command my feet to stop moving. I face the dog, and now he sneaks toward me like he thinks he's invisible, rumbling deep in his throat.

I don't move. He keeps coming. My feet are a mile ahead of me, but I'm not traveling now.

"Fang!" I croak, trying to sound friendly. I've never spoken his name before.

Fang stops right there. He sits! He looks at me like he doesn't know me, so I whisper, "Good boy, good boy, Fang." Stretching his twitching nose toward me, he sniffs to tell whether I'm the intruder he beat up on this morning. But he is not trying to kill me now! Maybe he thinks it's his job to kill sprinting milk thieves. Yeah! Mr. Chambers asked me about what he might be guarding.

"Fang, you poor guy," I whisper again. "You think it's your job to chew me up, don't you! But Mr. Grisman clobbers you for it." Fang's ears swivel when I talk, trying to pick up the truth about me.

Being alive this close to Fang is too good to be true, so I don't want to press my luck. I'm leaving, but so slowly that Mr. Chambers will never believe it when I tell him. I turn and walk with my hands in my pockets down the road toward Sam Miller's store at Garfield Bay, whistling a little tune to show Fang I don't care if he is tough.

Around the bend in the road, I resume speed.

As usual, Sam's boat is moored down on the jetty where he lets it rest during the day, except when he rows out to the far jetty to meet the mail boat as Post Master, and to pick up supplies for his store. After closing time, we always see Sam's rotund form rowing his boat the same three miles he had rowed from home across the bay that morning. He tips up a flask of his own dynamite moonshine both coming and going.

"What'll it be today, Bob?" Sam must have seen me eyeing my usual choice because he is already reaching for it underneath the glass-covered counter.

"D'ya have a nickel's worth of dry dog food, Sam?"

Sam pulls his hand out of the candy case. "You changed your snack choice, Bob?"

"It's for a dog, Sam. I want him to be my friend, but I don't have anything to give him. Want something to feed him one at a time so he'll trust me."

Sam looks at me without blinking for several seconds. Then he asks, "What about your own usual snack? You givin' it up?"

"For now, I guess so."

"Well, young fellow, this is your lucky day," says Sam. "We do happen to have a special today on dog food, one pint for four cents. You can carry it in an empty candy carton. And we have a unique opportunity to offer spearmint bubble gum by the piece, today only, for a penny."

"What you said, Sam, I'll take it!" I laid my nickel on the counter by the cash register. "Thanks!"

Some things a person should never do on the run. One is to blow bubbles with spearmint-flavored gum. I slow to a walk on the way home so I can appreciate every bubble.

Walking, savoring, hoping to see Fang on the way home, I slow a little more as I near Grisman's lane. There's Fang, sitting on his haunches where his lane joins the road, as though he might be waiting for me. I stop popping my gum long enough to unfold the top closure on the candy carton and take out five fat kernels of dog food. I keep walking slowly until my closeness makes him nervous enough to stand up.

"Fang! Here boy, have a snack." Slowly I pitch one kernel toward him, underhand, so he won't think it's a rock. My aim is so good he can sniff the mystery kernel right under his nose. Now he holds that chunk in his mouth for a second, kind of like me, eating a Babe Ruth, before he swallows it and looks for more.

I kneel down and place the remaining four chunks of on a flat rock near the roadside. Then from the middle of the road I wait to see what happens.

"It's all right, fella," I tell him. "It's for you." Sure enough, he goes to check it out, without a growl this time. While he gulps the morsels, I walk on down the road, whistling toward home. Tomorrow I'll find out whether he'll let me slowly cut across his meadow.

At the home stretch around the curve, I come up to speed again and change course. Can't wait till tomorrow morning to tell Mr. Chambers he was right about the dog, so I'm on my way. Gotta go tell him now and find out what else he knows.