

The Discovery of Running Bare

Jonathan Carroll

An elegant expatriate American who makes his home in Vienna, Jonathan Carroll wishes only to assure us that this little item - which bridges Johnny Preston's 1960 hit 'Running Bear' (awoop-awoop) and the early seventies novelty single 'The Streak' (booga-da-booga-da) - is not directly autobiographical, although he did once live next to a graveyard where a mysterious figure known only as The Phantom ran naked after midnight. 'We used to have to keep our dog in, to stop him lifting his leg at funerals,' he remembers. Carroll's first novel was The Land of Laughs, and he has subsequently published The Voice of Our Shadow, Bones of the Moon, Sleeping in Flame, A Child Across the Sky, Outside the Dog Museum and others, all a distinctive blend of sophisticated urban mores, metaphysical fan-tasy, and scary black comedy.

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e was as nervous as a cat under a full moon. He couldn't keep still, couldn't keep down behind the tombstones like the others around him. Unaware of it, he kept peeping and chirping to himself like a baby bird. Once in a while he'd even hum a line of the song - 'Run-ning Bear loved Little White Dove . . .' Then he'd pop up for a look, hoping to be the first tonight to see their own Running Bare.

'Get down, Bob!' A voice below him whispered savagely. 'You're going to scare the bastard away!'

'Shut up! No one's going to scare him away. He'll come. Damn well *better* come!'

Joe Balding, crouched below, chuckled quietly. It was Joe who'd convinced him to join the others for their nightly appointment in the town cemetery with the mysterious stranger who ran naked through the tombstones clad only in hightop sneakers and an Elvis Presley mask. Everyone else had been coming for days to look. Since the first sighting, it

was all anyone could talk about. Who was he? Why did he veer left last night and not right? Why did he wear an Elvis mask and black sneakers? Why these things? Who was that masked man?

Two weeks before, Mary Helen Cline and Gene Dreevs had been rolling around as usual in the cemetery. In the middle of very intense kissing, both of them heard someone running hard nearby. Leaping up as one because they were sure it was Mary Helen's mother, they were the first to see the nude man running to beat Hell across the open moonlit graveyard. Mary Helen screamed. It was the first time she had ever seen a totally nude man and her scream was more fascination than fear. The runner slowed just for a second, looked at them, then broke right, running fast and loose again away from the light into the dark behind the stones.

Almost every kid in town now knew about Running Bare. The night after the couple saw him, the entire basketball team tried to hide behind the few graves near where he'd been spotted. And he came! Dressed the same, moving along the same route . . . No one could believe it. It was hard for them to keep in their delighted laughter, their excitement. They knew if they didn't scare this new star away, their summer would be filled with his nightly show.

He moved so well. Many agreed he had the moves of a great natural athlete - the highest accolade they could pay. He looked like a ballplayer, a Triathlete. They could imagine him swimming miles, then riding a bicycle up a fifty degree incline. Fluid and not tight at all, good long strides that were wide but not stretching. Someone joked that if Melvin and Little Jackie weren't with them night after night, they'd've sworn it was one of the two blacks who played on the team.

'Couldn't be a black. He's got a-white cock.'

And so he did. That was the first clue. They knew he was white and probably had black hair. Unless he was really weird and dyed it down there. Suddenly finding out who he was became serious business. Someone thought up the name 'Running Bare' after the old song about the doomed Indian and his girlfriend with their 'love big as the sky'. The play on words was appreciated and the name stuck. But people disagreed about who it might be.

One night after he passed, someone suggested, 'Let's just go up and pull his mask off!'

'Yeah!'

But no one did. No one did because that would have ruined it. Without secrecy, there would be no Running Bare. It would be Joe Simmons or Dexter Lewis or someone else boring they all knew. The way he was now, masked and Running Bare, was the best. Impressive. Athletic. Mysterious. That was how they wanted it.

Moving fast always, he would come down off the hill from the Ashford Avenue entrance to the cemetery. Running towards the fountain in the middle of the place, his big dick flapping up and down like he was fucking the air, he'd veer suddenly left or right. He rarely ran straight. Almost to the fountain, he'd cut one way or the other when he came to some invisible point in the road only he recognised. Even *he* was set in his own ways.

Hunkered down along with the rest of them, Bob McKinney had always begged off going with the gang. Because Bob was absolutely petrified of Running Bare.

At eighteen, McKinney believed in reason. You studied French so you could do passably well on an exam so you could act sheepish about the grade in front of the others when they admired you both for your brains and athletic ability. You pulled a prank you knew you'd be punished for because the prank would add the right touch to your reputation and make a good story to carry around in your repertoire. Like the time he had thrown the paper airplane at the geometry teacher. He knew the punishment would be severe, but he also knew the rewards would be worth it. And it was. The story was told for weeks afterwards about how Bob McKinney had slowly gotten up when the teacher demanded to know who'd thrown the plane. How he'd absolutely *strutted* to the front of the room to receive his due. That was the kind of 'you get what you pay for' deal Bob could understand.

So this Running Bare confused him at first. Then the confusion grew quickly into a purple tentacled fear. Why would anyone want to run naked and alone through Dead Land? Without an audience! He secretly admired the runner's humour and dramatic savvy in choosing an Elvis mask. He admitted to himself that if he had ever thought of doing something as original as this, he'd've ruined it by choosing something stupid like a Frankenstein mask and his mother's high heels. No, this Running Bare was something special. It was the greatest idea anyone in town had ever come up with - stark naked at night through the *graveyard*. Real genius. And the crowning glory was whoever it was hadn't talked about it. He did it solo. Run Silent, Run Deep. He didn't care if others knew. You always made sure others were there. You did everything for others so they'd be amazed and jealous - at your mind, your daring. Anyone who did just to do was either a

genius or only nuts. Both possibilities scared Bob McKinney. He didn't want to have anything to do either with Michelangelo or a loon ball.

Yet an odd thing happened as he squatted there for the first time; waiting like everyone else for the one and only Running Bare. He grew jealous. He realised he hated this guy for being content to put on a show only for himself. He hated him for being everyone's favourite when all he was really doing was having his own fun. Bob wanted to be Running Bare, but RB knowing everyone was watching, like going up to shoot the last jump shot of the game with the score tied. The glory that comes only from an audience, hundreds of eyes and minds on you, the glory of owning every being in a place for a few splendid seconds of all your lives together. How come this nude weirdo didn't care? Where did he get off being so fucking content?

A plan came and it made Bob smile like a lizard whose eyes can go in all directions at once. He was going to tear off the mask! He was going to one-up the other! Be the one to show them all who he was. At least that would take whoever it was down a peg - make him human again.

Joe, coming up for the third time to try and pull his friend down, saw him first.

There he is!

Bob looked but could make out only a dark figure moving down the far hill in a thin blade of moonlight through the trees. But then he was moving too. Moving like a lion after a big fat tasty unsuspecting gazelle. Instinctively he kept to the shadows, hoping to stay out of the runner's view as long as he could. The lion in darkness! The silly gazelle enjoying its last minutes before it fell to earth forever.

That's what he was thinking as he moved. That and the line to the song. 'Running Bear loved Little White Dove -'

But the guy was fast. It was hard keeping up. He moved so gracefully. He would have made a great basketball player. Bob stopped two hundred feet away, then moved again. He got to within ten feet of where he was sure the other would stop and veer. He crouched, heard the other's slapping feet on the still day-warm asphalt road.

Closer. At the last minute, Bob came up and started moving, running too, coming up after *him*.

'I'll get him for us, guys! I'll get him!' he yelled happily and much too loudly over his shoulder. But he knew they hated him now. He could feel the hatred on their faces. He knew they wanted him to leave Running Bare alone. But that was impossible. He had to win.

The runner saw them all coming. Bob first, the others up from behind the stones and coming too now. But instead of veering or trying to run away, the mystery simply stopped where he was. Didn't even raise his hands. Bob was running so fast either at Running Bare or away from the others that he smashed right into the naked man.

Upon contact, thinking of nothing else in the world, he grabbed for the mask, pulled it up and off. Yoo Hoo! Peekaboo!

Whoopie! It was *Whoopie?* The town idiot was beneath the Elvis face. The sad, demented man who rode an old bent bicycle around with a child's wagon tied to the back. Whoopie who sang to himself and an eyeless doll he'd found years ago in someone's garbage and painted bright green all over. This was the runner.

The others ignored him as they jumped on McKinney and started beating him.

Interested only for a minute in what was happening, the empty-headed man picked up his mask and slid it back on. Then he began to run for the darkness.

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