



WHEN COLTS RAN

ROGER McDONALD

WINNER OF THE 2006 MILES FRANKLIN AWARD FOR *THE BALLAD OF DESMOND KALE*

Copyright © Roger McDonald 2010. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

VINTAGE

A Vintage book
Published by Random House Australia Pty Ltd
Level 3, 100 Pacific Highway, North Sydney NSW 2060
www.randomhouse.com.au

First published by Vintage in 2010

Copyright © Roger McDonald 2010

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted by any person or entity, including internet search engines or retailers, in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying (except under the statutory exceptions provisions of the Australian *Copyright Act 1968*), recording, scanning or by any information storage and retrieval system without the prior written permission of Random House Australia.

Addresses for companies within the Random House Group can be found at
www.randomhouse.com.au/offices

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication Entry

McDonald, Roger, 1941–.
When Colts Ran / Roger McDonald.

ISBN 978 1 86471 041 0 (pbk).

A823.3

Cover photograph titled *Yarning Mode* by Jeff Carter
Cover design by Sandy Cull/gogoGingko
Internal design by Midland Typesetters
Typeset in 12/15 Bembo by Midland Typesetters, Australia
Printed in Australia by Griffin Press, an accredited ISO AS/NZS 14001:2004
Environmental Management System printer

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



The paper this book is printed on is certified by the © 1996 Forest Stewardship Council A.C. (FSC). Griffin Press holds FSC chain of custody SGS-COC-005088. FSC promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

ONE

CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT BOYS THREW back bedsheets and sat in a window chasing coolness, cupping cigarettes in their palms, hanging over boarding house balustrades. The night was blackout black as they whispered a vow – if any of the younger boys narked, they would kill them.

The four monkey-scrambled down a fire escape and off through descending leafy streets. The first was Kingsley Colts accompanied by stray cats at ground level, flying foxes overhead. When Colts ran the ghost of himself led on, always too far ahead, always out of reach – a boy counting telephone poles and lumpy cracks in the bitumen in lucky odds and evens.

Squawks and crashes of fruit bats in the figs were the only sounds except for the wet slap of sandshoes. They passed Royal Sydney Golf Club and came to the seawall at Rose Bay, sharing another fag, shielding it under their shirts. They could do nothing, it seemed, without a puff.

Breasting water, they sidestroke to a moored launch with their clothes fisted above their heads. There was a low humid

sky, the feel of rain. Once reed beds grew in the bay, dugongs fed in the shallows, lights of fishermen were fireflies and the smell of bushfire smoke drifted over the water. Now military craft choked the harbour: torpedo boats, destroyers, gun barges, ferries converted to barracks, tethered Catalina flying boats. Outlines of shipping rose and fell. Sentries watched but the low-slung launch with its rumbling inboard motor slid past unchallenged.

‘So much for national defence,’ said Colts, eyes down at water level sweeping the dark. It was the way his guardian, Major Dunc Buckler, snorted the phrase.

‘Colts,’ the others growled back at him, ‘shut your bloody cakehole.’

Colts stood in the scuppers spreading his arms in the dark, creating a willing target.

They travelled the length of the harbour past Garden Island docks, under the walls of the tram depot at Bennelong Point, below the high span of Sydney Harbour Bridge where they circled awe-struck and idled the motor. Nobody saw them or cared enough to shout warning – it was perfectly infuriating to be so powerfully ignored.

Since the Japanese war started Colts hadn’t seen Dunc Buckler, only had letters with marginal cartoons of soldiers around cooking pots, men shooting crows with guns that went *pop*, drawings of box-shaped Blitz wagons in the background, their radiators geysering steam. Buckler was posted to the interior of Australia, where there weren’t any bullets flying, but that would change when the army bosses got smart about him and stopped belittling him with the real war going on without him.

The boys tilted their heads back.

‘Look at that, willya?’

The bridge’s arch bulked over them, riveted in grey. They stood in the wallowing hull, backs turned to each other, aiming out in the water as far as they could reach. Mist trailed down and

stroked their faces. To see a road and railway high in cloud was to be drawn to a life reversed from the one they knew – where authority would flow to their knuckles, money to their pockets and distances unravel under their boots.

Colts whispered he wanted to scramble up the granite piles and crawl over the half-moon of towering steel protected by radiating spikes. ‘Bullo to that,’ said the others, ready to chuck it in. Colts passed round a corncob pipe stuffed with bitter shag. His temerity was exhausting. Old boys of their school had won medals in Libya, in Greece, had fought in Malaya, their names asterisked on the honour board in gold. *Let me go free*, Colts prayed to the gods of civilised restraint who bound him. Everything was in his circumstances, all that mattered was blocked wishes. *Get it over with, Colts*, he said to himself.

A fourth-former, Wayne Hovell, came to the housemaster’s door, knocked, twisted his toes with caution, half wanting to be out on the water, wild in the dark and forgotten, the other half waiting for the harbour to go up stupidly thanks to Colts. Slope-shouldered, with a distinctively protuberant breastbone and a habit of tucking in his chin then jerking his head forward to make a point of incontrovertible rightness, Hovell was nick-named Chook.

He spoke his moral duty. ‘There’s something up, it’s stupid, it’ll go all wrong, it’s that, it’s that –’

‘Who are you talking about?’

‘Colts. He’s a bigger noise than Tojo.’

The housemaster went to the side garden wearing a spotted dressing gown, holding an umbrella in the downpour. Old Gargler slapped at mosquitoes against skinny calves that were pitted with shrapnel wounds from the First War job. Colts the

moral blur. Hovell the wielder of conspicuous truths. The master knew which he liked better, but Hovell would be Head Boy soon enough.

‘Colts?’ he addressed the leading shadow coming home in sodden shirt and shorts, a boy with bony knees, wrists too large for shirt-cuffs, floppy hair of bedspring curls, eyes of bottle-brown making an appeal of tainted innocence.

‘Sir.’

‘Brains?’

‘Of a bird, sir.’

‘Of a brainless bird, Colts.’

Old Gargler steered the boys into his study, whippy cane at the ready. They emptied their pockets of tobacco tins and pipes. Colts stepped forward untangling fingers from his hair and smearing clammy palms down the sides of his shorts, wondering who’d narked. Old Gargler was against boys nose-picking and combing their hair in class; for the rest he was mostly onside.

‘Ready?’

‘Sir.’

Extending his arm, Colts rotated the cup of his right hand and stretched his palm obligingly. Victims of firing squads cultivating martyrdom displayed such pride, and Colts flinched but did not cry out.

Gargler gave them his lecture and they listened with grave attention. ‘You could have been killed, aargh. How would the school have explained it? Aargh. You. Colts. What about Major Buckler? Imagine the shame, aargh.’

Colts tried but it was too hard, really, and he could only grin. Wait until Buckler knew what they’d dared. Colts wouldn’t write any letters, he’d tell Dunc Buckler himself – follow the wheeltracks, cross the desert, climb the last sandhill, find the bush camp and be hailed for pluck and humour. That was the wish, although who knew how it would happen.

Tired as he was, chastened as he was, and as flaming lucky, Colts slipped around warning fourth-formers to say their prayers. 'You're dead in the morning,' he said, twisting ears and giving Chinese burns as a taste of things to come. 'You're maggot-meat, green mutton, duck-guts – you're skinned.' The one in particular, Chook Hovell, he kept his eye on, followed after lights-out, tackled on the flagstones of the deserted quad. Hovell fought back using fists like hammers while Colts knelt on his rib cage. Thumping and pounding, he couldn't keep the kid down.

'Say quits.'

'Like buggery I will.'

Colts stood back and gave a kick to Hovell's weaving head that landed somewhere around the ear. After that jolt, Hovell drew raggedy breath but stared at Colts harder, cleaner, fiercer than before. A stare that said, *I know better what a bloke should do.*

'It was me told Gargler,' he said, getting up on all fours.

'Berrk, berrk-berrk, bk-bk-bk.'

'I'd do it again.'

Leering down and calling Hovell a matchless prick, Colts chose to follow through to an ending, because once committed to an action there was no other path to follow. The coup de grâce was a tap to Hovell's jaw with his toecap, hardly more than a gentle lofting motion, though it awfully sounded like a crunch. Regrettable, but there you were. No such thing as Marquis of Queensberry rules on a dark night, and guess whose quotation that was.

On the trip they'd made in the last month of peace, Colts and Dunc Buckler came to the wide grassy curve of a thousand-acre river paddock. It was more beautiful in that arid landscape than a lord's neglected parkland. With the truck unpacked and the camp site arranged, Colts came out from behind a tree flexing

his bowling fingers and asking Buckler if he'd like a knock. Buckler found himself holding a bat. Seeing how useless he was made Colts laugh.

'Give up.'

He'd never joked like that with his guardian before. It was like getting his stripes.

They unrolled their swags each side of the fire and lay propped on their elbows drinking burnt coffee mixed with sweetened condensed milk. It came from a tin cracked open with a tomahawk. In the morning they stamped their feet and warmed their hands at the embers. Emus came stalking towards them, attracted by Buckler standing near the truck and waving his grey felt hat. He was a square-built, dark-complexioned man, scowlingly handsome, full-lipped with a sensitive, almost offended twist to his smile. Colts often practised the look in a mirror: '*Imshi Yallah*,' he hissed at Johnny Turks attacking him.

Later in the day Buckler sat on the running board and balanced his Remington typewriter on a log. Bruising his fingertips, he generated the feeling of opposition he needed all the time. Authorship was good for that, he said.

'What are you writin'?' said Colts when he was back from potting rabbits with the .22 and Buckler was still at work, only pausing to brush away flies.

'Never ask. It's bad luck to tell.'

When Buckler took a walk Colts looked anyway. Lifted a stone and rustled the loose pages with his long fingertips to find it was all about the would-be soldier, the sensations he would feel in battle. Buckler was the living ghost of old mates, the sworn defender who spoke for the dead. They'd spent their quota of flesh at Gallipoli and in France, and he lived the full nine lives making them right.

'I'm calling it *Infantry Fighter's Handbook*, if you want to know.' Buckler shaded a hand across the page, stopping the boy from

reading on. ‘The army chiefs don’t want it published; they don’t like the truth.’

The few bits Colts read – ‘A normal reaction for a man and not a coward’s is to soil himself under fire’ – only confirmed Colts’s view that to be chosen by Buckler was the pinnacle. Shit-scared was how Colts felt often, but you could still be the best in Dunc Buckler’s books in that condition.

It was Saturday cricket a few days after the night adventure. Colts took the new ball. Utilising a deceptive angling action, his fingers plucked at air, shimmered air currents where swallows flew – screwed blindness into a batsman’s stare. He was inspired by Randolph Knox, Captain of School and the First XI when Colts was a long-eyed thirteen and followed Knox everywhere in a worshipful gang. The ball nipped through a player’s defence and deftly removed the bails. With every delivery the umpire sucked his pencil but nodded play-on.

Colts’s odd wrist action, almost a throw, produced its share of full tosses and wides, giving Colts three wickets for twenty runs that day. Old Gargler said if he could find the length it might be Colts for the NSW Colts. More was involved than competence with a ball, however. There was the matter of moral character to be measured. The school only did what it could with what it had. Old Gargler liked Colts but had no final answer when it came to character; sad to say, that was up to the Head, who arrived during tea, running a weary hand back through his silver hair. Word had reached him through an influential parent, Lady Margaret Hovell.

‘Colts?’ he called the boy over to the door of his car, declining to offer a seat, as he did to his favoured ones. ‘Do you know what you’re up for?’

‘Up for, sir?’

‘Don’t act the innocent, lad, it won’t wash.’

Colts stood with his hands folded behind his back, hip cocked.

‘No, sir.’

‘Stand straight when I’m talking to you,’ said the Head.

Colts obliged like a piece of string not entirely devoid of slack.

‘Shoulders back,’ snapped the Head, and Colts, just then, braced inside his thoughts, having had enough of it, sensing what was coming. With a bothered sigh he returned to his habitual lean against nothing, getting his limbs arranged like half-balanced sticks, his grubby blue felt cricket cap pulled down over one eye.

‘Very well,’ the Head hissed. ‘So must it be.’

Boys gathered in closer, savouring an event. The match hung waiting. Colts stepped into a school story published on coarse wartime newsprint, where chums raced around behind a jolly old principal and lashed his ankles together with school ties, and everyone had a good merry jape as the chief went facedown in the turf, and later there would be forgiveness, raspberry buns, roast chestnuts, cocoa by the fire.

Colts scratched himself on the backside.

‘Are you with me, lad?’

Colts said he was, indeed.

‘Alackaday, Colts, I have written to your guardians, the Bucklers. You know the sort of letter I mean. I have penned only a handful of such missives in my long career.’

‘Why me, sir?’

‘We have a fourth-former in sick bay with a broken jaw, that is why.’

The Head scrutinised Colts, the sort of wheedler he’d expected to find in a colony bred from slum children when he came out

from Cambridge in '33. Headstrong in games but lacking in moral valour.

The matter of Colts's orphan state, ward of Major Buckler and his birdlike bohemian wife, Veronica, moved the Head's emotions only a little. Colts's father, gassed in Belgium, had died in the early '30s, and his mother passed away soon after. Call this a test for any boy, and sad, but with few families untouched by Great War tragedy – and the Head himself, though he never blew the regimental trumpet, taking a fair whipping on the Somme – there was no special pleading in it.

The recalcitrant Dunc Buckler had been sent his account for term fees, plus several reminders, responding with airy excuses from various dismal posts.

'I am ruling off the ledger, Colts. You are to return to the school, collect your belongings, and then a taxi will be called. I have telephoned Mrs Buckler, who is expecting you. After that, Colts, may the good Lord help you.'

Veronica Buckler held her brush high, standing on a fruit crate to reach the top of the canvas; instead of bringing the bristles down to make a streaked, deliberate smear, so familiar to her as to be a reflex of the spirit, she jumped back to the floor and took a fistful of rags made from her husband's old pyjamas and cleaned up.

The Head's phone call expelling Colts was a delicate condolence compared with more personally distressing news to hand. Her informant – 'so sorry being the one to tell you' – was a seedy young man Buckler had sacked, by the name of Des Molyneaux, assistant surveyor's clerk. There'd been two letters three months apart, the first a wages demand, belittling Buckler in the tradition of slighted employees. Veronica was appealed to as keeper of the books. She'd sent ten pounds.

Today's letter came in the same rounded, backward-sloping, resentfully particular hand. It stated for Mrs Buckler's 'private information' that Buckler was 'making a run', was 'released from ties', was 'consorting with freckled Irish barmaid types'.

Oh, the awful petty victories of the tittle-tat. So fleeting to the teller, so branded upon the told.

The venomous phrasing had Veronica recall a woman's name: R. Donovan, and Buckler's nonchalance around that name when they'd entered cheques-paid in the monthly ledger.

'R is for?' she'd wondered, as Buckler deprecated while colouring.

'Rusty – a charity case with a snotty-nosed kid sister in tow. They're on the wallaby.'

Closing her studio door Veronica turned the key and, tapping the window glass, looked back in. The old tom she trusted through a leather-hinged flap to rid the room of mice stared past her. It showed how little she mattered to creatures of instinct. Promises made, banns posted, ceremonies gone through, life lived, love played out – what a circus.

Her painting looked back at her, roughly right: a stone verandah, a distant view reflected in tin cans and acetylene lamps, veined eyeballs of a boy being attacked by a goat, its hoofs balanced on his skinny shoulders. In the opposite corner a woman in a torn raceday suit chewing on a feathered hen leg. Climbing around the frame a pumpkin vine and a pile of Queensland blues. Flying overhead a small bird of nocturnal disposition, the Australian owlet-nightjar, her figure or mark of integrity she sometimes thought. One had sung at her birth at two a.m. on a winter's night.

She called the painting *Goats* and the boy was Colts – the same bleak, smitten and fanatical concentration of gaze, the lick of devil's curls at the forehead, the mocking flat smile and the squared dimple on the chin with a pattern of goosebumps. The

ravenous woman was Pansy, Colts's dear mother, locked down in pomegranate shades of oils, denied her fullest expression of love by early death. She'd enjoyed a day at the races, eating the raceday lunch of cold poultry, wearing a suit of fine-cut linen with a straw hat and fake cherries. Laughter always so quick. And then so finally gone. The verandah posts of the homestead framed the track to her grave on a rocky ridge. Small as a postage stamp, it was drawn in every detail.

Expecting the boy since the telephone call from the Headmaster, Veronica heard noises in the house and followed down to his room, watching from the door as he packed a kitbag with Buckler's initials stencilled in flaking black army lettering.

He was sniffing, crying, turning his face away.

'It's all right, Kings, I know everything,' she said in her whimsical, flutey voice so ill-matched to any sort of energetic undertaking or seriousness, although that was deceptive.

He didn't reply, of course. Worst thing known was to tell a boy what he felt, that he wasn't the first on earth to bust with a feeling. The offence was bullying a younger boy, inflicting physical damage. Veronica had little doubt that Colts was in the wrong. Intimidation was the counterfeit courage of sixteen. He'd learned it when younger, uncritical with awe: Buckler and his returned-man cohorts breaking up meetings, confronting strikers with clubs and following them round in cars, sending men to their houses when they weren't at home to wise up their wives. Buckler was no coward but his politics were craven. Here was Kingsley caught in the same old trap; you had to feel sorry for him.

They sat at the kitchen table while she spread pikelets with honey and poured tea. With just the pair of them it was all right like this – only when Buckler was present did Veronica feel barred from the boy's attention. Now under his burning gaze she felt herself exist.

They needed to be allies for a time. She could not do this on her own – pump out from the damaged heart what love she had for Buckler and save the boy from the vortex of second-hand experience, which Buckler had roused. Because of something Colts once said to her in a blessed moment of childhood innocence, she knew him as a seeking soul. Such figures walked through the world half in, half out. Could it ever be proved to Kings that the world was enough? Through despair of him, with paints to hand, she'd attacked him by the goat to bring him back – to show him what pride was doing and too much prancing maleness. Look into the goat's vertical irises and see Dunc Buckler staring back. A goat was a proud, foolish, selfish and beautiful thing. It had its own stink about it, too.

Compared with that man's rule, what a weak, blind, uninspirational impression Kingsley had of *her* love and its power – nothing seemed able to convince him otherwise except that she loved his sister Faye best when the two of them, boy and girl, sad orphans and cuckoo chicks in her nest, were the definition of love as much as dependents could be. They were the children she'd been unable to have with Buckler, who'd won their care in the toss of a coin over the claims of his Anzac mate, Birdy Pringle.

Going to the sideboard Veronica opened a drawer, taking out a ten-shilling note. It was a situation needing manipulation. Kingsley guardedly watched her; he was amusingly tight, hating to spend his savings, wanting more.

She surprised him by handing the money over. Was it to shut him up and send him away? If so, good on her, his eyes seemed to say. Pies, lemonade, ginger nut biscuits and tins of sweetened condensed milk. Just don't stroke my hair and tickle the inside corner of my lips and say you love me.

Later they sat listening to the radio, getting the tally of stab and feint on land and sea. Colts doodled down the margin of

a newspaper map of war zones. Fear, isolation, loss and bravado gave national defiance a personal cast. Veronica looked over to see what Kingsley had drawn, glimpsing a sketch of their old horse-drawn caravan.

Interesting that, because the product of Veronica's own incessant pencilwork was a doodle of the same darned cart. So much for Europe in flames, North Africa scorched, Greece fallen, the victorious Japanese knocking at Australia's dunny door – it all came back to a woman, a man, a boy and a bleached sky beckoning their hopes. To a place called Limestone Hills in the Central West. To an old horse-drawn caravan on the Darling. Buckler had poisoned the mood of their happy lives, but Veronica had the energy to split the earth like a seed and gather the growth, taking back whatever fell tangled into her arms.

She found Colts looking at *Goats*, staring through the cobwebbed glass at her crowded canvas.

'It looks like scrambled eggs,' he said.

'It's you, darling. It's yours.'

She watched him deaf to the idea.

'Kings, I've decided. *Goats* will be yours one day.'

'Don't bother,' he said, fists clenched tight against his trouser seams, and she was satisfied because in denial he always went to the heart.

Colts left first, heading off when she honestly thought she had him. Give him twelve hours, eighteen at the most, to get to Limestone Hills.

The whole train was drunk and singing, rattling along, all seats taken, aisles blocked, corridors crammed, the engine far ahead and visible rounding a curve with the firebox flickering red. A boy with dark, alive eyes cupped a hand to rattling

window glass and his hopes went out like a radio call, out to the stars and into the constellations. Are you receiving me, over and out. Wilco, wilco, wilco went the pounding engine on its iron tracks, making its way over the Blue Mountains and onto the slopes and plains under starshine.

A green jumper peeled back his thoughts. She was a young mother with red hair and white skin, her baby's fists in the way as Colts slid around to get a better look. When she saw him looking she stared back and he left his seat and stood in the corridor feeling beaten.

Before leaving home Veronica took a pair of scissors and rough-cut her hair short enough for regular basin washes. From a high shelf she took overalls she'd worn in her tomboy years, nipped to the waist and still needing no letting out. Barely eating, she was back to smoking, bundling hoarded tins of quality cork-tips. Following Colts mere hours behind, she took her husband's old Bedford, roll-starting it in the street – sitting on pillows with cushions at her back and double-shuffling the gears, wearing chamois leather gloves and looking exceedingly important, like a child. She had enough rationed petrol to get her to Limestone Hills, where she guessed there was more fuel stored through the reasoning of squirrel-minded Buckler.

When Veronica was Colts's age, before studying painting at East Sydney Tech, she'd gone with her dad to Riverina cattle sales. At sixteen she'd looked eleven, sitting up driving a one-horse dray. They'd returned droving store cattle over the dry ridges and steep gullies of the Dividing Range, taking weeks to reach home on the reedy lagoons and saltwater estuaries of the Isabel River emptying to the sea.

Now it was time to reclaim that capable part of herself

consigned to Buckler when they wed. She would make a loop of a thousand or even two thousand miles, if needed, attend to her questions of that goatish man and return to the sparkling estuary; its snapper, flounder, sweet prawns; its beaches eight miles long with curved waves thumping in hard from the Tasman Sea. There she would become whatever she might have been before Buckler claimed her. If Buckler came back with her, it would be on those terms, that she would be herself – except what those terms might be in the sense of an agreement she could not imagine. The whole circumstance made her sad from the wartime situation with cousins and friends dead or in Japanese hands to the sexual insult of not being wanted by the fool she loved.

Colts came to a cold siding and spilled out while the train barely slowed. Crawled under a wattle bush, shivering and damp. Drank water from a brass tap at a ringed water tank as the sun came up. Train-song was audible when he put his ear to the rails, the razor-thin hum of departing carriages. There he stood exposed, broken open, newly hatched, a sore-eyed long-necked boy in a rumpled army greatcoat.

Wrong place, wrong siding, he'd made a mistake in the half dark and stepped from the train a stop early. Limestone Hills siding was the next along.

Sensations poured in, not of Colts's own bothered self so much, now that he started walking and hoping, but of a time that was always there without him – a country place that was the truest part of him: the smell of dry grass and morning dust in his nostrils, the clamour of flocking galahs and the bells of topknot pigeons, with always the light lengthening, fingering through bushes and rocks, seeking, he sometimes imagined, the quartzite at the old cemetery where his mother was buried.

But he wouldn't think of that. Not in a thousand years. Not of the streaks of gold in the hard white stone.

The sun burnt off cool distances. Hills that seemed close weren't anymore – they were slammed away in hardness of light. Colts was part of this world as he walked, being swung by Buckler in a game of being let go, of knocking Faye flat as he rolled through the dry grass, laughing so much he spewed. How did you take hold of life again? What was the trick? When would it happen? Yell him the secret!

'Climb up, sonny, I'll give you a ride.'

A farmer going the same direction drove him in a sulky to a house along fencelines with tight, right-angled bends and stock laneways running with skinny sheep. The farmer said he wanted to improve a lot of things but there was the drought, the manpower shortage, all the odd-jobbers away in the army, men chewing sand in Palestine or studying Bushido in Changi Gaol, only oldsters left now, crocks and whatever greenstick boys fell from the sky. Looking sidelong at Colts when he said that.

In a yard protected by rolls of hessian, a leggy foal stood with its mother glistening with new life.

'She's one day old. I've been up all night,' said the man, easing the sulky to a stop, his cheeks colouring and something getting into his manner as he told Colts about the distances foals travelled following their mothers in mile after mile of loyal pursuit. They would never run as far again in all their born days with so little to fuel them. They had the whole greatness of their lives in them from the start.

'You'd know that.'

'Me?'

'Because you're a runner,' said the man a bit slyly. 'Streaky as bacon, speedy as a wheel.'

Colts turned aside, admitted nothing. But it was the greatest

feeling a boy could be given – being known but not pinned down.

In the kitchen a tall wife greeted him and he was fed on mutton chops, eggs with hard skirts fried in fat, cups of dark tea with sticks in them. Toast was made by burning slices of bread on the hotplate of the wood stove. He was hungry and grateful, but he hated that kitchen. You didn't always have to do your washing up in a kerosene tin cut at the diagonal, saving the soapsuds for the roses, all eaten by bugs.

They asked his name.

'Kingsley,' he said after a struggle.

'Just "Kingsley"?'

'Colts.'

The two looked at each other and their eyes said, 'Limestone Hills, Dunc Buckler's kid.'

'What about a day's work,' said the woman, 'because we're a bit stuck.'

'Only if he's keen,' said the man, 'before he pushes along.'

'I'm ready,' said Colts, lifting his jaw.

The woman looked round startled when he came back into the kitchen to get his hat and heard her on the telephone asking for Limestone Hills, Mrs Buckler.

Through cleaning a feed bin and hauling heavy sacks of seed wheat onto a horse-drawn wagon, Colts's fingernails bled, his eyes ran red-rimmed and sore that day, and he developed a rasping cough. Through digging a post-hole to a depth of three feet, his hands were raw by smoko time.

The farmer was a First War man. 'You're looking for trouble,' he said as they yarned of the scrap, leaning on shovels. 'You're scared you'll miss out. You think fighting will give you that. Well, it might, so get on with it, son, and you'll soon find out.'

A rabbit plague was on and the man handed him a pea rifle. There were so many bunnies coming in for a drink they barely

stirred when Colts walked through them shooting from the hip, rippled hunched furry nothings with nowhere to go.

In the full day's work Colts understood something about labour that seeded a thought in his brain. The heave of a strainer post made its own dumb impact down the end of its hole and stood there throwing a hard shadow into the day.

When he came back to the house there was a figure on a motorcycle waiting. Not a male, he saw when he came closer, but a woman in trousers with a hat and the front brim turned up. He recognised the bike, too. It was Buckler's old BSA 250cc with sidecar from Limestone Hills, which Faye – hair flying back – had so loved to ride, spinning around like a willy-willy as Colts sat in the sidecar laughing and hanging on.