

THE BIG ISSUE

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WOMEN'S BUSINESS

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OSCAR PISTORIUS IS RUNNING TO LONDON; KELLY VINCENT HAS A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT... THERE'S NO STOPPING SOME PEOPLE.





MY WORD



RUNNING WILD

A HAIRY ENCOUNTER INSPIRES YD BAR-NESS TO GO BEYOND HIS EXPECTATIONS.

EARLIER THIS YEAR, I found myself a temporary resident of a remote goldmine in Western Australia's Pilbara region. Imagine the place: nothing except rocks and scraggly bush stretching to the horizon. There was nowhere to go, and no reason to try. You could choose a direction, and run for days and days, but you'd never meet another soul.

I was working as a rope-access technician with a team of mechanics and climbers. We were on night shift, abseiling on ropes to help refurbish a giant rock-crushing mill. It was both complicated and dangerous: we were helping welders access a dark, narrow space inside the motor to install metal plates.

It was a completely unnatural environment for humans: claustrophobic, alien and exhausting. Our bodies were twisted into strange shapes, burdened by harnesses and tools, as we folded ourselves into the metal confines on the end of slender ropes. At the end of the shift, we blinked our way through the sunrise towards curtained rooms and deserved sleep.

My co-worker was an Irishman named Rory, a boss of the friendliest and most laid-back sort. He was also, insanely, an ultra-marathon runner. A few weeks previously, he had completed a 96km race in NSW's Blue Mountains. He told us how the human body was designed by evolution to be an efficient long-distance runner, and of the mental tools used by ultra-marathoners to keep going. I couldn't quite understand what would inspire someone to run such distances.

Rory, though, was determined to keep in shape, and chose to take a sunrise run into the surrounding bush. Overestimating myself, I stupidly decided to join him.

This mine site had a golf driving range, and we started our run at this incongruous amenity, running past the lush grass of the football oval (the brightest green for hundreds of kilometres in any direction). We waved to the gardening crew, who were pushing back the bush with their petrol-driven weed-whacker machines.

Beyond the football oval, there were scattered tracks in the reddish sand. We followed one, and I futilely attempted to keep up with the ultra-marathon runner. The exercise helped to dispel the stiffness of the night's work, but I could barely keep from staggering. Rory slowed down to match my pace, and we continued into the wild landscape. The sun kept rising and, with it, the temperature.

Suddenly a wild creature confronted us, staring us down. It was a dingo, tawny and rangy. It regarded us with a curious attitude. If you have ever spent any time with dogs, you can read their body language. This dingo was signalling that it wanted to play. Like a little puppy, it pressed its front paws flat on the ground, and bowed its back downwards. It lowered its head, looked up at us and opened its mouth. Its tongue lolled around, and it radiated playfulness and fun.

Or, so it appeared. We would have recognised bared teeth, raised hackles

and an arched back as clear signs of aggression in a dog, but we were unsure what to make of the dingo's 'puppy play'.

No matter how playful, this dingo scared us. Rory and I reversed course and began to run back towards the camp. As we sped off, the beast ranged behind us, keeping a safe distance but with wide eyes and white teeth visible. It easily kept pace, and we knew that if it truly wanted to snap at our heels, it could do that.

Since then, I can no longer look at even the most toy of poodles, or the most lap of dogs, without thinking of the wild animals roaming that northwestern bit of bushland. I know that, before humans and before dingoes, there were more terrifying things still: marsupial lions with scimitar teeth, and thylacines with wide jaws. Even though these creatures are gone, this dingo was enough to scare us back to the mining village. We hurried to the safety of the mining camp and the other humans. The dingo eventually gave up the chase and melted into the bush.

It was a bit of a fright, but as we ran I realised that this was an experience I would remember forever: for a short distance, I kept pace with an ultra-marathon runner and, equally amazingly, managed to stay several steps ahead of a wild dingo. It turns out that motivation takes many forms.

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