

## The Day The Pigs Flew

by Adrian Meredith (c) 2020

Nineteen eighty-five Darwin was a different world to today. I was ten years old, in Grade 5 at Malak Primary School, and that was the year that I was chased by a pack of rabid pig dogs, and very nearly died.

My Dad had bought me a red ten-speed bike the year before, though I wasn't very good at riding it. It was a good bike, too good for someone as uncoordinated as I was. I had ridden it to school once, and ended up with so many cuts and scrapes on my body that Child Services were called to see if I was being abused at home. They couldn't believe that someone could be that bad at riding a bike. Eventually, the school banned me from riding it to school, so I only tried it on weekends, trying to find soft grassy places to ride it, in case I fell off. Once every couple of weeks I would try, waiting until my previous wounds had healed, and then invariably I would crash it again, and a new wound would replace the old one. One day, I determined, I would learn to ride it.

I had good friends then. Jeffrey and Tim were the two leaders, both a little older than me who were born in Darwin, both just before Cyclone Tracy hit. After them was Bruce from France, and then the younger boys, Julian from Papua New Guinea, Hercules from East Timor and finally Buddy, an Aboriginal boy from Nhulunbuy.

And then there was me, Adrian, an awkward overly skinny boy from Melbourne, though sometimes I said I was from Tasmania. My upper body was like a stick, with ribs showing worse than Hercules even, but with massive tree trunk legs that looked out of place with the rest of my body. They told me I should be great at riding a bike, but somehow I wasn't, probably because I had never ridden a bike when I was little, nor a tricycle, nor a little bike with training wheels, instead suddenly having this

massive red ten-speed bike as my first one ever. My body was so uncoordinated that I could never get it to work properly. I was good at running, though, just not so good at sports, as I kept falling over and dropping things.

Jeff and Tim had told us about the news reports. A pack of dogs had escaped from a fighting ring. They had been bred to fight, being starved almost to death so that they hungered for the fight. They were pitbulls mostly, with a particular viciousness about them that we called pig dogs. They had attacked a few people, old women mostly, and five or six were in hospital, but Jeff said that the true level of attacks was probably a lot worse than that, because they didn't want people to panic. The police hadn't figured out who they belonged to yet, nor had they been caught.

Tim said that the best thing for us to do was to all use bicycles to get around, just in case one of them attacked. I already had my clumsy far-too-big ten-speed bike, and Tim and Jeff each had their own bikes, while Hercules and Julian both borrowed them from their older brothers. Tim had spares, so he gave one to Buddy and another to Bruce.

So there we were: Jeff, Tim, Bruce, me, Julian, Hercules and Buddy, seven boys, three of them aged nine, and the other four ten. I was smack bang in the middle, younger than Jeff, Tim and Bruce, but older than Julian, Hercules and Buddy. All of them looked so confident on their bikes but not me. Mine looked like a walking death trap, my feet seeming to slip all over the pedals, and I wanted to just push it and walk beside it.

"Now, if everyone is okay, I want to do the City to Surf," Jeff said. "It's 10 k, or thereabouts, a bit over, but we will be riding. I know the way because my dad runs the race, and he has showed me the maps many times. Do you reckon you guys can do it?"

I gulped. There was no way I could manage an hour-long ride. I could barely last five minutes without falling off and hurting something. I looked around and the others were all smiles, even Bruce who had never ridden a bike before, happily sitting on his borrowed BMX. Buddy had barely used one before either, and he was fine. Julian and Hercules were both on bikes far too big for them, which belonged to their older brothers, and they were fine. I had to be fine.

Nobody said anything, so then Jeff started off, leading the way. Tim followed not far behind him, his plump legs pushing into the pedals as the wheels turned furiously. I looked at them hurtling off quickly into the distance. Julian was third, then Buddy and Hercules weren't far behind, then Bruce, and finally me. I decided that I was going to lose them and head back home alone, pretending that I had simply gotten lost, to avoid the humiliation.

"Hey! Adrian is struggling!" Bruce called out, and suddenly they all turned around.

I felt stupid then, riding along like a protected species. They all wanted to move more quickly than they were, but slowed down just for me. Even Bruce shot off into the distance ahead of us.

As we started to get into the heart of the city, the traffic started to build up and we started to ride on footpaths more than roads, just in case one of the many drunk-drivers decided to swerve to hit us. Many drivers then liked to deliberately hit bike-riders, even kids. Some enjoyed the crunching sound of a car wheel riding over a kid's bicycle, or so Jeffrey told us, and you never knew who had that cruel streak inside them. Our teachers had told us much the same story, but we believed Jeffrey more. Teachers would sometimes scare us, but Jeffrey always told the truth, so when he told us to go to the footpath, we knew we should go there.

"We're coming up to the starting line soon," Jeffrey said, words that sent a shockwave through my body, as I gulped for air in horror.

"Wait, do you mean that we haven't even started yet?" I asked, exasperated. The other boys laughed, even as I struggled to comprehend just how long it had taken just to get to that point.

"It's City to Surf, *Aids*," Jeffrey told me, "not Malak to City." I had gained the nickname Aids soon after arriving in Darwin, after some of the kids saw me helping out some injured animals. At first I was called Band Aid but then they dropped the Band part and just called me Aids.

The cars seemed to zoom around like rabid beasts, looking for any excuse to run us over, to break our legs and gobble us up in their tyres. "It should take about an hour max," Jeff said. "Then we come back."

"If we are quick, it might be half that," Tim added.

We pushed our bikes to the official start line, with chalk still on the road, a little faded from the official race some seven months prior, but still clearly there. Jeffrey held up his hand as if he had a starter's gun. "Get Ready, Set, Go!" he shouted, then we started off.

I felt energised, remembering when I had ran the race the year before, finishing fourth in the under sixteen age group, in spite of being just ten. I was by far the fastest runner of my friends, and I should have been the fastest cyclist too, I thought, if only I wasn't so uncoordinated. I raced past everyone and hurtled down the road. I tried not to fall over, and felt this great smile push over my face as I realised I was doing it, riding properly, not falling over, quicker than the rest of them.

Then Tim zoomed past, and, as I turned around, I saw Jeffrey looming up to me, then he overtook me too. The others weren't far behind. I panted and tried to move

more quickly, but my legs were hurting as I tried to push into the pedals properly, then the chain became stuck and I started to fall over.

"Stop!" Julian yelled out, as he grabbed my bike just before I fell over it. It took a while to get the message to Tim and Jeffrey, but soon they came back. "I think his chain has come off!"

I felt embarrassed as we sat by the side of the road, as Julian and Hercules tried to figure out how to put the chain back on. Finally, Buddy had the idea to push it a bit with his fingers. His hands got all greasy doing it, but he didn't seem to care, and rubbed it over his face like it was war paint. Then suddenly everyone had the same greasy war paint on their face, even me and then we were off again.

"Try going at your own pace, *Aids*," Jeffrey told me. "You're not running today where you can lap us all. You are on a bike, and you are not good on bikes."

Hercules, Julian and Buddy all decided to slow down and ride with me, making sure that I didn't fall over or have any incident. The others didn't go too far ahead either. They were all worried about me. It was nice but humiliating at the same time. I wished that I could ride properly.

I couldn't remember the route from when I had ran the race the year before. Then it was all just about following the leader, with hundreds or perhaps thousands of runners, men, women and children of all sizes and descriptions, running together at once. We didn't see the road, or even that we were running on one. Then there were crowds lining the streets. Seeing it now I saw what it was really like, a long desolate road that looked boring. The race itself had felt fun and thrilling.

But then, just as I was feeling good about myself, something horrible happened. I felt this sudden jolt on my wheel, and the first thing I thought was that I had hit a rock

and was about to fall over. But then I looked at the ground and there was something very different, as a dog was trying its best to grab hold of my wheel.

"Shit! Dogs!" Bruce yelled. "Everyone go quickly!"

None of us had noticed them come up to us but suddenly there were four mangy-looking dogs on the road with us, and one of them had just bit my wheel. Perhaps it had noticed that I was the slowest and most vulnerable one. Perhaps it knew that I was the one to target.

"Do you think they might be the dogs from the news?" Tim asked, as he rode along just out of range of the dogs, and was looking back at them.

"I don't know," Jeff said, "but let's not take any chances. Everyone, you are going to have to ride more quickly, and get off the main road. We need to split them up."

"Split them up? You mean we should try to lure them away?" Tim asked.

"We could each fight one dog. Their strength is in their pack. So we need to split them up. See if half of them can follow half of us, and the other half the other half. If they don't, then we join up again and help the others. If they do, then we split up," Jeff said.

"What about the race?" Tim asked.

"The race doesn't matter now. If these dogs are the ones from the news, we could die if they catch us," Jeff said.

*Die?* That single word reverberated in my mind, like I was tasting it over and over again, but it wasn't a good taste. It was ugly and old and sweaty. It made me feel sick, but not the kind of sick where I wanted to retch and spew it all out over the road. This was the kind of sick that made you shake in fear. I didn't want to hear it.

"We aren't going to die," I said, trying to brush it off. "Come on, Jeff, stop exaggerating. They are just dogs." I looked back at the dogs, and counted four of them,

each with pale white skin and pink patches around their eyes and mouths. They looked like bits of their faces had been bitten off. They were horrifying to look at.

"In France, we call them *cochien*, or pig dogs," Bruce said. "They are trained to kill. They kill other dogs, cats, and even people. When their jaws latch on, they never let go."

Bruce didn't usually talk so darkly. It scared me greatly. "Come on, Bruce, now is not the time to tell scary stories," I said. I was shaking.

"These dogs have killed before," Jeff said. "An old woman and three children, a six year old girl, and three and five year old boys."

"So no nine and ten year olds, then?" I asked sarcastically.

"Adrian, you're the one they are after!" Julian said. "You're the slowest! You're the one whose wheel they bit! You're the one they want to kill!"

"We aren't going to abandon you," Jeff said. "We are just going to ride really fast and hope that they chase us. Tim and Bruce, you come with me. The rest of you stay and protect Adrian."

We tried to call off after them but they were lost to the road, turning off down a side street, and they were gone.

It felt empty and scary to have our leaders go. If we had just lost Jeff, we could have coped with Tim, but losing both at once was horrifying. It felt like we were being left to die.

The dogs were far enough back that we couldn't hear them, and I was thankful not to hear any more of Bruce's talk about *cochien*. It sounded like one of those stupid horror stories that kids tell each other around the campfire. But Jeff wasn't one to lie. Perhaps we were just too young to know any better, and trusted him more than we should.

"Shouldn't we follow them?" I asked, as we passed by the side street.

"No," Julian said, shaking his head. "Perhaps some of the dogs will follow." I watched, and none of them did.

I had been a great fan of David Attenborough for years before this, and was always fascinated about when the predators such as lions hunted their prey. They didn't simply take on the weak animals, they also took on the weakest of the weak. It was always the oldest or the youngest, the sickest or most injured. They picked them off one by one, to make sure that they had the easiest fight. Lions never risked their own lives for a kill. They always made sure it was the easiest fight they could get.

Those dogs were never going to go after Jeff, Tim or Bruce. I knew that, and so did they. They wouldn't go after Hercules, Buddy or Julian either. While the three boys I was left with were much smaller than the ones who had left, Hercules and Julian at least could fight. I wasn't sure if Buddy could, but I certainly couldn't. Any time I got into a fight, I ran. I was the fastest runner in the school and nobody could catch me. That was how I avoided getting beaten up. But these dogs were too fast, and that was never going to work.

"Just stay in the same gear," Julian told me. "Which gear works best for you?"

"Third," I said. "Maybe fourth."

"Don't change it," he continued. "Just stay in the same gear. You cannot risk the chain falling off again."

"You guys should go," I said. "The dogs won't come for you."

They looked at each other, but shook their heads. "If we have to, we can all fight together," Hercules said. "I know Bo, and can use a pole, and a bike is kind of like one big pole." Buddy suddenly sped up, and pushed far ahead of us. Then he turned and was gone. "We should stop," Hercules said. "If we die, we die together, but we



have a chance now. We won't once we have ridden for too long and have all lost our breath."

He slowed down and was about to stop. "No!" I told him. "Keep going!" Hercules was just nine years old, a full year younger than I was, but his whole family, all eight of his older brothers, were heavily involved in martial arts. It was some kind that they used in East Timor, involving poles and knives and swords. He tried to show me a few times but I had never really got the hang of it. They fought in competitions sometimes, and even won a few trophies that they put on display. If all of his brothers were here, I imagined that they could take on the dogs.

"They lock on," Julian said. "Once they bite, they don't let go until you die. We shouldn't stop."

Some cars raced by, deliberately going around the dogs, but not thinking to stop or offer help. That was what Darwin was like back then. People would just watch terrible things happen, and they'd tell the police and media afterwards, but they never wanted to risk their lives to help. "You guys should go," I told them, looking at the cars whizzing by. "I will figure something out. If I fall off my bike, I can outrun them."

"You aren't that quick," Julian said. "Those dogs are too fast, and if they get a single bite, anywhere on your body, you are dead."

"Okay, so what do I do? We can't fight them, and nobody is going to stop to help." I was desperate. I wanted some magical way out, for someone to stop their car, get out some big machete knives and cut them to pieces.

"Find a fence," Julian said. "Remember John's fence, and the dingo?" John was an older boy from New Caledonia whose mother had found an injured dingo on the side of the road, and brought it back home to nurse it back to good health. Nobody wanted it, so she kept it. It had escaped many times, so they kept having to build the fence

higher and higher, and ended up putting barbed wire at the top. Then John showed us how he had copied the dingo when it jumped over the fence. We would run at the fence and kind of ran up it as much as we could, then we would flip over the barbed wire. It was tricky and very risky, but it was something we did, a kind of boyish bravado.

"Yes, I remember," I said. I looked back at the dogs again. I felt transfixed by their faces. All I could see looking back at me were eyes that wanted to kill, a hunger that felt evil.

"Find a fence and run towards it," Julian said. "The higher the fence the better. Smash your bike into it, then get off, and run up it, then leap over it. The dogs can't climb like you can."

"And take off your shoes," Hercules added. "And if you have to, fight with your bike."

"We will stay with you for as long as we can, but at some point we will have to leave you," Julian said.

"We will try to help if we can, and we will get help. My brothers will fight the dogs. I know they will," Hercules said. I knew they would too. I knew that they would risk their lives to save me, and they would know how to defeat these pig dogs. I didn't know what kinds of weapons they would use, but I knew they could do it.

"My father knows people who can help," Julian said. We found a side street and rode down it, swerving around as fast as we could, then we kept swerving. "Over there, at the end of that street, is a big fence. At the top is some barbed wire. Run to the end and jump it," he said.

"Okay. I am not very good at barbed wire," I said.

"Yes, you are," Julian said. "I've seen you at John's place. You are better than the dingo. You can do it. Your life depends on it."

"And take your shoes off before you climb!" Hercules yelled. Then they were gone.

The dogs were still chasing me. There were more of them now, ten perhaps. I didn't notice the extra ones join. I wasn't sure if they had come out of people's houses, and therefore were normal dogs, or if they had just been too far back for me to notice. It was terrifying. I was starting to run out of breath.

So I rode. I went as fast as I could, and, as I got closer to the end, I saw the fence. It was metal with those diagonal bends in it, the kind of wire that is really easy to climb up. It looked too small to start with, small enough that the dogs might be able to climb up it, but the closer I get, the higher I saw it really was. It towered up perhaps ten metres off the ground, higher even than the one in John's yard, and at the top were these huge circles of barbed wire, more than twice the size of John's. I hadn't practiced jumping over barbed wire that thick. I didn't know if I could do it.

My bike slammed into the fence, and it felt like my heart leapt into my throat with the force. I fell off it, somewhat awkwardly, but I didn't notice my injuries. I could hear the dogs running in like the wind. "Take your shoes off," I told myself out loud, echoing Hercules's words, as I tried to push the sneakers off. My left shoe felt stuck. Then the dogs were on me, before I had the second one off.

One dog gave a snarl, pushing its snout towards me to try to bite my neck. I don't remember grabbing the bike, but it was in my hands. It was normally very heavy, but suddenly it felt no bigger than a Bo, and I was thrusting it in all directions. Two of the dogs were upon me, then a third, then one of them bit at one of the wheels. I watched on in horror as its jaw locked, and it shook its head until, finally, horribly, the tyre

broke off, and the dog jerked its head until it let go, my broken bike never to be ridden again.

I tried to kick my left shoe off and started climbing. One dog grabbed at my shoe, still dangling off my foot rather awkwardly. I was sure it was going to grab onto my foot, and then I'd either die or have to live out the rest of my life with only one foot, but somehow I wriggled free. It ravaged my shoe and bit and chewed it into pieces. I would never wear those shoes again.

I had so often ran up fences like this before, usually with a running start, but I didn't have such a luxury. I picked the remains of my bike up with my right hand, as I clawed upwards with my left, trying to keep the dogs at bay, but they were grabbing back at it, pulling me down. Then I let it go and it collapsed on them. They bit and ripped through it in ways that shouldn't have been possible. They ripped through both tyres over and over again, and the wheels too, and even bit into the chain. The handle bars were ripped off. Metal was bent. It was horrible and terrifying to watch, yet I couldn't look away.

Then one of the other dogs started running up the fence. I leapt up higher and higher, just out of reach. For a moment it felt like it could climb with me, but then I found myself too high for it, huddled at the top, between the big round barbed wire and the highest that the dogs could leap.

I looked at the barbed wire. "But I can't," I whimpered to nobody in particular, knowing that my friends were long gone.

Then the dogs started to attack the fence, pushing it, then grabbing it and pulling it back. I realised what they were doing. It was only a matter of time before the fence would fall down, and me with it. It wasn't a matter of holding on, for even if I didn't fall, the fence would. I looked at the barbed wire and gulped. I had no choice.

I needed a little run up so climbed back about a half metre down the fence, then ran up, and I bent my body over, just as we had practiced at John's house, only more exaggerated. I would probably survive the barbed wire cutting into me, I figured, while I definitely wouldn't survive the dogs. I didn't like the idea of having my face cut to pieces and never being able to see or hear or eat again, but it was better than dying.

Somehow I did better than I ever had before. I watched as the barbed wire touched my forehead but didn't cut into it. It was like a light tickle. I kept my eyes open, thinking it would be the last time I would ever see anything again in my life, so sure that the barbs would cut my eyes out, but somehow they didn't. Then I was over it.

I tried to grab back onto the fence on the other side, but I had flipped far beyond it and my momentum was taking me even further. I tried to crumple my body. I was sure I would at least break my legs, if not worse. I could yet die when I landed. I landed with a thump. I tried to spread the pain out evenly across my body, but it was too awkward to do it properly. My legs ached in pain. I was sure that they were broken. My arms were cut too. But I wasn't dead.

I heard the yelps as the dogs were still pushing at the fence. I looked around for a house, or somewhere to run to, but there was nothing. There wasn't even a tree to climb up. I had done all of that for nothing.

I tried my feet and they seemed to work. I was surprised but relieved, and stood up. "Where am I?" I asked myself. Looking around I saw many airplanes, but this wasn't the airport. I saw tanks and the camouflage green of the military. "Oh shit!" I said.

Two men approached to confirm my worst fears. One spoke with a heavy American accent. I was starting to become dazed and didn't hear his words, but I thought he was threatening to kill me.

"The dogs!" I whimpered, pointing vaguely at the fence. "The dogs."

They seemed to understand as they both marched past me towards the fence, then opened fire.

I have vague recollections of the two men firing on the dogs, their jaws lurching at the fence, trying to push it away, not seeming to care that their heads were being blown off. My vision was blurry and I was never quite sure if it was a dream.

When I woke up, I was in a hospital bed under observation. I wasn't really injured, and, once I had woken up, I left pretty much immediately.

When I went to school the next Monday, nobody much believed my story. Jeffrey, Tim and Bruce were telling a very different story, about how they had fought bravely battle against all of these dogs, using their bicycles as weapons until the dogs ran away. I tried to tell my own story, but nobody would believe me, thinking that I, like Buddy, had ran off. Julian and Hercules didn't bother to tell their own versions.

To this day I don't know how I managed to leap over that barbed wire. I tried it many times after that, even on smaller pools of barbs, and I never managed to do it without getting something caught. Perhaps it was adrenaline that pushed me over.

The fall should have hurt a lot more than it did too. There is no way that I should have survived it without at least one broken bone.

I was never able to find that base again. I tried many times to ride there, and that fence was never there again, and nobody seemed to know anything about it.

I should have died that day. Those dogs should have killed me. But somehow, on the day the pigs flew, I flew higher.