

# *Halcyon Days: Part 1*

*James McFay*

This story excerpted from  
*Emergency? Yeah!*, a collection  
of short fiction by James  
McFay, available in full at:  
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When I was twenty-two, I was happier than I had ever been. I had a wonderful girlfriend and a good job. We both worked five days a week – long days that were easy enough to seem short. On weekends, I would drive us to the beach where we would swim, sun-bake, meet friends and drink milkshakes.

One day, to make my girlfriend laugh, I was balancing on the railing that ran along the esplanade. When I jumped down, a man approached me and touched my arm.

“Do you think you could do that for money?” he asked.

“Pardon me?” I said.

“Do you think you could do that if someone was paying you?” he repeated.

I was confused. My girlfriend looked at me, eyes wide.

“If I were to meet you back in here in a week, at midnight, and you were able to walk the entire length of this railing in bare feet without falling off, I would give you \$500,000.”

We both laughed and said, “Ha ha! How funny”.

But, insisting he was serious, he showed us a business card. He was the head of a real estate company; Billy Ballard and Co. His name was Billy Ballard. It said so on the card. And look, here it was on his driver’s licence. Ok. But why did he want to pay me \$500,000 to walk along a beach rail?

He smiled and said he was very rich and impulsive and

liked to do silly things with his money. If we were smart, he said, we would shake his hand now, take advantage of his promise and meet him here in a week and half a day.

“And what if I fall?” I asked. “What do you want from me?”

Billy Ballard seemed surprised. “What do I want? I don’t want anything from you! Nothing! What would I want from you?”

My girlfriend squeezed my arm.

“I don’t know,” I said. I shook the man’s hand and promised to meet him back there in a week and half a day. What did I have to lose?

As he walked away, I studied him from the back – he wore a neat, short-sleeved shirt, expensive leather sandals, cream cargo shorts – then he disappeared into the crowd.

“Did you see how he looked at your body?” my girlfriend whispered.

“What? No he didn’t,” I said.

“He’s probably a paedophile.”

“I doubt it.”

“Promise me you won’t go,” she said.

“Ok,” I said. “I promise.”



The next morning I called in sick and went back to the beach. The rail at the esplanade had a sharp ridge, a rectangle of wood that was turned on an angle, and it would hurt my feet after just a few metres. To make any sort of training worthwhile I had to find a fence with the same shape. I didn’t want to keep going to the beach, because I was sure someone would see me and tell my girlfriend. When I visited the park

near my place, I discovered all the fences were either flat wood or round, metal pipes.

So I drove around the city, checking all the green park squares marked on my street directory. It wasn't until the evening, roughly an hour's drive from my place, in a suburb I had never been to, that I found the right park. It had a shallow stormwater canal along its edge, and guarding the canal, for a good 10 metres, ran the perfect fence.

I climbed up onto it and started training. I began OK, but quickly got worse, trying to rush it. Many times I fell, on both the grass on one side and into the canal on the other. At one point, I twisted my ankle and had to sit for a bit to get over the pain.

I trained until it got dark and I couldn't see the fence any more.

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The next morning I called in sick again and cancelled lunch with my girlfriend - told her I had a stomach bug. Then I drove to the park and practised all day, stopping only for lunch.

For the rest of the week, I trained from nine-thirty in the morning till seven in the evening.

After the second day my feet were sore, their delicate bones bruised by the ridge of the fence. On the fourth day I was in so much pain I had to strap tea-towels around them and take painkillers. On the fifth day they were so tender that when I got out of bed and stood up on the carpet I cried out in pain and fell over. So I rested on the fifth day.

But I was back on the sixth.

By the end of the week, my balance was perfect.

I didn't fall off the whole day. I could mount the fence with a light leap from the ground and walk the entire length at pace and with confidence. The only remaining problem was cramping – after prolonged contraction the muscles in my feet would clench up.

I had estimated the fence at the esplanade to be around 500 metres, so I was aiming for fifty laps on the practice-fence. I could only manage 33 continuous turns before my feet cramped up, but I was hoping that without all the turning, I could make the full 500 metres.

My girlfriend called at lunchtime. I hadn't called her all week and hadn't been at work. She knew what I was doing. She knew I had been training. She demanded to see me, so I told her where I was, and went back to training.

It took her a train and two buses to get all the way to the park. When she arrived, she unpacked salad, rolls and chocolate milk. I told her I had eaten. She started crying, and demanded that I allow her to go with me that night.

“Of course,” I said. “I want you there.”

Then she kissed me and sat on the grass and painted her toenails and watched me practise and clapped when I made a long stretch of turns.

When it got dark I drove us back to my place. I wanted my feet to rest before midnight, so I had a nap. I woke at ten-thirty to find she had cooked pasta with mustard.

“This is what athletes have before a big race,” she said. “The acid in the mustard helps prevent cramping.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I used to be on the national running team,” she said.

“Really?” I replied. “I didn't know that.”

I put on a new tracksuit and we left for the beach.

We arrived at eleven-fifty. The man wasn't there.

"This is stupid. He's not going to turn up, and even if he does – as if he's going to give you all that money," said my girlfriend.

I ignored her and walked down along the railing, checking it for bumps, shaking the top and then marking the weak joints with a felt-tip. When I turned back I saw the man in the distance, standing next to my girlfriend, holding a bag. I walked back.

"Hello," he said with a big smile on his face.

My girlfriend looked nervous. He was wearing a long, thick duffel coat. We shook hands.

"So, are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Have you been training?"

"A little."

"Good." He grinned, opening the bag. "Here's the money."

Inside was a heap of hundred dollar notes, some tied together, some loose. I nodded professionally.

"Don't you want to count it?" suggested my girlfriend.

"Looks good to me," I said.

"Great. So which end do you want to begin with?"

I pointed to the end I had just come from.

"Ok then. When you're ready. And remember – you only get one chance. If you fall off, no money."

I nodded. My girlfriend put her arms around my neck and kissed me. She seemed to want to say something but the man was right there. I walked to the end, shaking out my limbs in the warm night, feeling only the gritty brick beneath the balls of my feet, the spread of my toes and the bend in my knees.

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By the time I reached the beginning of the fence I was well and truly concentrating, walking as if already balancing.

I sprang up onto the railing.

I walked exactly the same as I had in the park; surely, smoothly, making good time.

The beach and surf beyond were swallowed into the depths of my peripheral vision, until all I could see was the fence that my toes slowly pulled beneath me, like a long line of rope.

In this way I made it to 300 metres. Then my legs began to ache. At 400 metres I was in severe pain. My calf muscles were cramping up and the tendons in my feet were in spasms.

The last 50 metres felt like walking on stumps. I began wobbling. Then I panicked and ran. I made it to 30 metres, then 20, then 10, shouting in pain. Then my foot stepped into dead air and I fell off the end of the railing. My knee and elbow cracked on the brick and my shoulder smashed into the bag of cash on the ground.

I shouted and panted and puffed and tried to bend the cramps out of my legs. I writhed on the brick for half a minute until the pain had subsided.

Then I staggered to my feet.

I looked around.

The esplanade was empty.

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Kurraba Point, New South Wales, Australia

Part of ISBN: 978-0-646-59346-3

Set in Bembo Book MT Pro and Garamond

Beaufort is distributed worldwide by Ribbons Inc.

