

# 3 The Fastest Runner on Sixty-First Street

by James Farrel

**M**orty Aiken liked to run and to skate. He liked running games so much that sometimes he'd go over to Washington Park all by himself and run just for the fun of it. He got a kick out of running, and he had raced every kid he could get to run against him. His love of running and racing had even become a joke among many of the boys he knew. But even when they laughed at him they did it in a good-natured way, because he was a very popular boy. Older fellows liked him, and when they would see him, they'd say, "There's a damn good kid and a damned fast runner."

When he passed his fourteenth birthday, Morty was a little smaller than most boys of his own age. But he was well known, and in a way, almost famous in his own neighborhood.

He won medals in playground tournaments, and, in fact, he was the only boy from his school who had ever won medals in these tournaments. He became the winner of the fifty- and hundred-yard dash, and therefore he was called the best runner, for his age, on the South Side of Chicago.

Morty had his secret dreams. He was impatient to go to high school and get into high-school racing competitions. He'd never been coached, and yet look how good he was! Think of how good he would be when he had some coaching! He'd be a streak of lightning, if ever there was one. He dreamed that he would be called the Human Streak of Lightning. And after high school there would be college championships, and after that he would join an athletic club and win a place on the Olympic team, and somewhere, in Paris or Rome or some European city, he would beat the best runners in the world.

And girls would all like him, and the most beautiful girl in the world would marry him. He liked girls, but girls liked him even more than he liked them. In May, a little while before his

skate løbe på skøjter  
got a kick out of blev  
'høj' af  
race løbe om kap med  
good-natured elskværdig  
playground legeplads,  
skolegård  
tournament turnering,  
konkurrence  
dash spurt, løb  
im'patient utålmodig  
high school skoleform for  
unge over 14  
compe'tition  
konkurrence  
coach træne  
streak of lightning lyn  
human menneskelig  
college (svarer omtrent  
til) gymnasiet  
championship  
mesterskab





graduation, the class had a picnic, and they played post office. The post office was behind a clump of bushes in Jackson Park. He was called to the post office more than any other of the boys. There was giggling and teasing, but it hadn't bothered him, especially because he knew that the other fellows liked and kind of envied him. To Morty, this was only natural. He accepted that he was somehow different from other boys and very important. Even Tony Rabuski looked at him in this way, and if any kid would have picked on him, Tony would have punished that kid. Tony was the toughest boy in school, and he was also considered to be the dumbest. He was also the poorest. He would often come to school wearing a black shirt, because a black shirt didn't show the dirt the way that other shirts did, and his parents couldn't afford to buy him many shirts. One day Tony was walking away from school with Morty, and Tony said:

"Kid, you run de fastest, I fight de best in de whole school. We make a crack-up team. We're pals. Shake, kid, we're pals."

Morty shook Tony's hand. For a fourteen-year-old boy, Tony had very big and strong hands. The other kids sometimes called them 'meat hooks'.

**M**orty looked on this handshake as a pledge. He and Tony became friends, and they were often together. Morty had Tony come over to play, and sometimes Tony stayed for a meal. Tony ate like a hungry wolf. When Morty's parents spoke of the way Tony ate and of the quantity of

gradu'ation  
 afgangseksamen  
 picnic udflugt  
 giggle fnise, smågrine  
 tease drille  
 bother genere  
 es'pecially især  
 envy misunde  
 somehow in a way  
 pick on plage, drille  
 punish straffe  
 crack-up førsteklases  
 pal friend  
 shake giv mig hånden på  
 det  
 hook krog  
 pledge højtideligt løfte  
 quantity mængde



food he ate, Morty would reply by telling them that Tony was his friend.

Because he was poor and rather stupid, Tony was often teased by other boys. He was not able to run very fast, and they usually got away, laughing at him, saying that he had iron and bricks in his big feet. But after he and Morty had shaken hands and become pals, they found a way that would give Tony the chance to get even with the kids who tormented him. Morty would chase them, and had no difficulty in catching one of them. He'd usually be able to hold the boy until Tony would lumber up with punishment and revenge. Sometimes Tony would be cruel, and on a couple of occasions when he, in a dull rage, was sitting on a screaming boy, hitting him, Morty ordered Tony to stop. Tony did so at once. Morty did not want Tony to be too cruel. He had come to like Tony and to look upon him as a big brother. He'd always wanted a big brother, and sometimes he would imagine how wonderful it would be if Tony could even come to live at his house.

Soon their way of working together paid off, and the kids stopped mobbing Tony. Because of their fear, and because they liked and respected Morty and wanted him to play with them, they began to accept Tony. And Tony began to change. Once he was accepted, he looked on all the boys in Morty's gang as his pals. He would protect them as he would protect Morty. Tony then stopped making fierce and funny faces and acting in many odd little ways. After he became accepted, as a result of being Morty's pal, his behaviour changed, and because he was strong and could fight, the boys began to admire him. At times he really hoped for strange boys to come around the neighborhood and act like bullies so he could beat them up. He wanted to fight because he could feel powerful and would be praised and admired.

**E**ver since he had been a little fellow, Tony had often been called a 'Polack' or a 'dirty Polack'. After he became one of the gang or group around Morty, some of the boys would tell him that he was a 'white Polack'. In his slow way, he thought about these words and what they meant. When you were called certain words, you were laughed at, you were looked at as if something were wrong with you. If you were a Polack, many girls didn't want to have anything to do with you. The boys and girls who weren't Polacks had fun together that Polacks couldn't have. Morty Aiken wasn't called names. Tony didn't want to be called names. And if he fought and beat up

brick *mursten*  
get even with *hævne sig*  
på  
tor'ment *plage*  
chase *run after*  
lumber up *run slowly,*  
heavily  
re'venge *hævn*  
cruel *grusom*  
dull *sløv*  
rage *raseri*  
i'magine *forestille sig*  
pay off *give bonus, være*  
*til gavn*  
gang *flok, bande, kreds*  
pro'tect *beskytte*  
fierce *vild, rasende*  
odd *strange*  
be'havior *opførsel*  
ad'mire *beundre*  
bully *bølle*  
praise *rose*  
call names *give øgenavn*



those who called him names, they would be afraid of him. He wanted that. But he also wanted to have as much fun as the kids who weren't called these names. And he came to understand that these kids felt better when they called other kids names. He could fight and he could call names, and if he called a kid a name, and that kid got tough, he could beat him up. There was a name even worse than Polack – 'nigger'. If Tony didn't like a kid, he called him 'nigger'. He felt as good as he guessed these other kids did when he talked about the 'niggers'. And they could be beaten up. They weren't supposed to go to Washington Park because that was a park for the whites. That was what he had often heard.

He had heard it so much that he believed it. He sometimes got a gang of boys together and they would go to Washington Park, looking for colored boys to beat up. Morty went with them. He didn't particularly want to beat up anyone, but when they saw a colored kid and chased him, Morty would always be at the head, and he would be the one who caught the colored boy. He would grab or tackle him, and the others would catch up. He worked the same plan he and Tony had worked against the other boys. And after they had caught and beaten up a colored boy, they would all talk and shout and brag about what they had done. They felt good and proud of themselves, and they talked about how the Sixty-first Street boys would see to it that Washington Park would stay a white man's park.

And this became more and more important to Tony. If you could be called a 'Polack', you weren't considered white. Well, after the way he beat up these black ones, how could the other kids now say that Tony Rabuski wasn't white? That showed them all. That showed he was a hero. He was a hero as much as Morty Aiken was.

**M**orty was a proud boy on the night he graduated from grammar school in June. When he received his diploma, there was more applause in the auditorium than there was for any other member of the class. He felt good when he heard this clapping, but, then, he expected it. He lived in a world where he was somebody, and he was going into a bigger world where he would still be somebody. And he was in the midst of a happy and friendly crowd: teachers, parents, aunts, uncles and older sisters. A local politician made a speech praising everybody, adding that in this group there was one who not only promised to become a first-class athlete but who had already won gold medals and honors.



guess *gætte, antage*  
 weren't sup'posed to *var ikke*  
 måtte ikke  
 par'ticularly *særlig*  
 at the head *at the front*  
 grab *gribe fat i*  
 tackle *spænde ben for*  
 catch up *indhente*  
 brag *prale*  
 proud *stolt*  
 see to it that *sørge for at*  
 con'sidered *anset for*  
 hero *helt*  
 grammar school  
*grundskolen*  
 dip'loma *eksamensbevis*  
 ap'plause *bifald*  
 add *tilføje*  
 honor *æresbevisning*



And on that night, Morty's father and mother were very happy. Morty was their only son. Mr. Aiken was a carpenter. He had saved up money so that the house he owned was now paid for. He and his wife were quiet-living people who minded their own business. He believed that a boy should have a good time in sports, should fight his own battles, and that boyhood – the best time of one's life – should be filled with happy memories.

After the graduation ceremonies the father and mother took Morty home where they had cake and ice cream. The two parents were deeply moved by the applause given to their son when he had walked forward on the stage to receive his diploma. They were raising a fine boy and they could look people in the neighborhood in the eye and know that they had done their duty as parents. Morty had the whole summer before him. He would play and grow and enjoy himself. He was not a bad boy, he had never gotten into trouble, he wasn't the kind of boy who caused worry. It was fine. In August there would be the father's vacation, and they would all go to Wisconsin, and he would go fishing with the boy.

The days passed. Some days were better than others. Some days there was little to do, and on other days there was a lot. Tony Rabuski was working, delivering flowers for a flower merchant, but he sometimes came around after

carpenter *tømrer*  
 mind one's own  
 business *passe sig selv*  
 raise *opfostre*  
 gotten (Am.) got  
 little only a little  
 de'liver *bringe ud*  
 flower merchant  
*blomsterhandler*



supper, and the kids sat talking or playing on the steps of Morty's house or of another house in the neighborhood. Morty liked to play running games, feeling the excitement of running like hell and like a streak of lightning, feeling your speed in your legs and muscles and getting to the goal first.

There wasn't anything to worry about, and there were dreams. Edna Purcell, who had been in Morty's class, seemed sweet on him, and she was a wonderful girl. One night she and some other girls came around, and they sat on the steps of Morty's house and played Tin-Tin. Morty had to kiss her. He did, with the kids laughing, and it seemed that something happened to him. He hadn't been shy when he was with girls, but now, when Edna was around, he would be shy. She was wonderful. She was more than wonderful. When he did have the courage to talk to her, he talked about running and ice-skating. She told him she knew what a runner and skater he was. A fast skater, such as he was, wouldn't want to think of skating with someone like her. He said that he would, and that next winter he would teach her to skate better. At once, he found himself wishing it were next winter already, and he would imagine himself skating with her. Coming home again, he would carry her skates, and they would be alone, like in another world, and then, there in the quiet park, with white snow all over it, he would kiss Edna Purcell. He had kissed Edna when they'd played Tin-Tin and Post Office, but he looked forward to the day that he got from her the kiss that would mean that she was his girl, his sweetheart. Everything he dreamed of doing, all the honors he would get, all the medals and cups he dreamed of winning – now all of this would be for Edna. And she was also going to Park High. No matter what Morty thought about, he thought about Edna at the same time. He thought about her every time he dreamed. When he went to Washington Park to swim, he thought of Edna. When he walked on the streets in the neighborhood, he thought of her. Edna. Just to think of her, Edna made everything in the world wonderfully wonderful.

And in this way the summer was passing for Morty. Morty sat on the curb with a group of boys, and they were bored and restless. They couldn't agree about what game to play, where to go, what to do to amuse themselves. Morty suggested a race, but no one would race him. They couldn't agree on playing ball. One boy wanted to go swimming, but no one would go with him. Morty sat by himself and thought about Edna. He guessed he'd rather be with her than with the kids. He didn't know where she was.

goal *mål*  
sweet on in love with  
cup *pokal*  
curb *kantsten*  
be bored *kede sig*  
amuse oneself *more sig*  
sug'gest *foreslå*



Tony Rabuski came around with four tough-looking kids. Tony had lost his job, and he said that the niggers had jumped him when he was delivering flowers down around Forty-seventh street, and he wanted his pals to stick by him. He told them what had happened, but they didn't get it, because Tony couldn't tell a story straight. Tony asked them didn't they know what was happening? There were race riots, and the beaches and Washington Park and the whole South Side were full of dark clouds, and over on Wentworth Avenue the big guys were fighting, and the dark clouds were out after whites. They didn't believe Tony. But Morty said it was in the newspapers, and that there were race riots. The bored boys became excited. They bragged about what they would do if the jigs came over to their neighborhood. Tony said they had to get some before they got this far. When asked where they were, Tony said all over. Finally, they went over to Washington Park, picking up sticks and clubs and rocks on the way. The park was calm. A few adults were walking or strolling about. A boy of eighteen or nineteen lay under a tree with his head in the lap of a girl who was stroking his hair. Some of the kids smirked and leered as they passed the couple. Morty thought of Edna and wished he could take her to Washington Park and kiss her. There were seven or eight row-boats on the lagoon, but all of the occupants were white. The park sheep were grazing. Tony threw a rock at them, frightening the sheep, and they all ran, but no cop was around to chase them. They passed the boathouse, talking and bragging. They now believed the rumors which they themselves had made up. White girls and women were in danger, and anything might happen. A tall young guy sitting on the grass with a girl called them over and asked them what they were doing with their clubs and rocks. Tony said they were looking for niggers. The young guy said that he'd seen two near the goldfish pond and urged the boys to go and get the sonsofbitches. Screaming and shouting, they ran to the goldfish pond. Suddenly, Tony shouted:

"Dark clouds."

They ran. Two Negro boys, near the pond, heard Tony's cry, and then the others' cry, and they ran. The mob of boys chased them. Morty was in the lead. Running at the head of the screaming, angry crowd of boys, he forgot everything except how well and fast he was running, and images of Edna flashed in and out of his mind. If she could see him running! He was running beautifully. He'd catch them. He was gaining. The colored boys ran in a northwest direction, crossing a road.

**jump** (*her*) *overfalde*  
**stick by** *holde med,*  
*hjælpe*  
**straight** *lige ud,*  
*sammenhængende*  
**riots** *optøjer*  
**dark clouds**  
 (sl) Negroes  
**jigs** (sl) Negroes  
**this far** '*helt her over*'  
**club** *kølle*  
**rock** *stone*  
**adult** *voksen*  
**lap** *skød*  
**stroke** *kærlegne*  
**smirk** *grine skævt*  
**leer** *glo frækt*  
**la' goon** *lagune, sø*  
**sheep** *får*  
**graze** *græsse*  
**rumor** *rygte*  
**pond** *dam*  
**urge** *opfordre*  
**sonsofbitches**  
*skiderikker*  
**in the lead** *at the front*  
**image** *picture*  
**flash** *fare*  
**gain** *hale ind (på)*



Morty was held up by a funeral procession. The other boys caught up with him. When the funeral procession had passed, it was too late to try and catch the colored boys they had been chasing. Angry, bragging, they crossed over to the ball field and marched across it, shouting and yelling. They picked up about eight boys of their own age and three older ones of seventeen or eighteen. The older ones said they knew where they'd find some shins. Now was the time to teach them their place once and for all. With the older boys in the lead, they left the park and marched down Grand Boulevard, still picking up men and boys as they went along. One of the men who joined them had a gun. They screamed, looked in doorways for Negroes, believed everything anyone said about Negroes, and kept boasting about what they would do when they found some.

"Dark clouds," Tony shouted.

The mob crossed to the other side of the street and ran cursing and shouting after a Negro. Morty was in the lead. He was outrunning the men and the older fellows. He heard them shouting behind him. He was running. He was running like the future Olympic champion. He was running like he'd run for Edna. He was running like a streak of lightning.

The Negro turned east. He had a start of a block. But Morty would catch him. He raced along the center of Forty-eighth Street. He began to breathe heavily. But he couldn't stop running now. He was outrunning his own gang, he was now about half a block ahead of his own gang. They screamed murderously behind him. And he heard shouts of encouragement.

"Catch'em, Morty boy!"

He heard Tony's voice. He ran.

The Negro turned into an alley. Morty entered the alley just in time to see the Negro spurt into a yard in the center of the block. He'd gained more. He was way ahead of the white mob. Somewhere behind him they were coming and yelling. He tore on. He felt the movements of his legs and muscles, felt his arms, felt the sensation of his whole body as he raced down the alley. Never had he run so fast. Suddenly Negroes jumped out of yards. He was caught and held. His only thought was one of surprise. Before he even realised what had happened, his throat was slashed. He fell, bleeding. Weakly, he mumbled, just once:

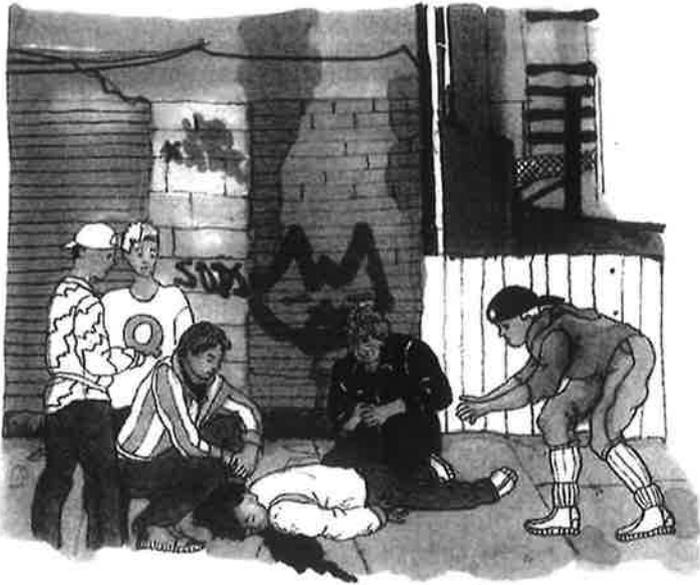
"Mother!"

The Negroes disappeared.

He lay bleeding in the center of the dirty alley, and when the gang of whites caught up with him they found him dead in dirt

funeral *begravelse*  
 catch up with *indhente*  
 ball field *boldbane*  
 yell *scream*  
 shins (sl) *Negroes*  
 boast *prale*  
 mob *flok*  
 outrun *run from*  
 a start of *et forspring på*  
 murderously *blødtørstigt*  
 of en' *couragement*  
*opmuntrende*  
 alley *gyde*  
 tear (tore, torn) on *fare*  
*videre*  
 slash *skære over, flænge*  
 mumble *mumle*





and his own blood in the center of the alley. No Negroes were in sight. The whites surrounded his body. The boys trembled with fear. Some of them cried. One wet his pants. Then they became maddened. And they stood in impotent rage around the bleeding, limp body of Morty Aiken, the fastest runner on Sixty-first street.

1. Is Morty the sort of person you would envy? Give your reasons.
2. Would you like to be his friend? What are the positive and negative sides to it?
3. Why do the other kids tease Tony? (Give at least 3 'standard reasons').
4. What happens to Tony after he makes friends with Morty?
5. '...these kids felt better when they called other kids names.' Can you explain this?
6. What were Tony's reasons for chasing black boys in the park?
7. How do you feel about the relationship between Morty and Edna?
8. Try to imagine how Tony lost his summer job.
9. Describe what a race riot is, and what might make it start.
10. Why do other boys and men join Morty's and Tony's gang in the chase?
11. How do you feel about their behaviour? What do you think could be done to stop them?
12. How does Morty, in a way, kill himself?
13. How do you feel about the ending? Has the story got a 'moral'?

**sur'round** *omgive*  
**tremble** *ryste*  
**impotent** *magtesløs*  
**limp** *slap*

