

*There is a dog I run with at night. He isn't mine. He's the dog of my elderly neighbor, Sara. He sleeps in her front yard with no leash or chain. No fence. He prefers the stars and evening air to the worn rug beside the wood stove. Like me he longs for the open road.*

The Dog is a black Lab, greying at the mouth with the barrel shape that breed tends to take on at mid-life. I am a woman of that same tender age with far more energy than I know what to do with. We meet at midnight, sometimes later, whenever the mood comes upon us. He waits eagerly by the mailbox at the end of my drive.

Sara calls the dog Desmond, but I cannot seem to call him anything other than The Dog. He is my companion in the lone hours and anything other than The Dog would suggest a conventional partnership, which we do not share. We are the night runners. Our work is quiet. Anonymous.

The Dog is slow, but he can still run and so can I, and it is this one thing we do together. Our route is a three-mile loop encircling the rural Vermont village where we both live. Gospel Hollow to Robinson Cemetery to the County Road and back. Respectable citizens by day, at night we are wild things. Soaring over potholes, running in our bare feet on the cool dirt, feeling our way in the darkness. Never once have we fallen. Some vast goodness guides us runners - human and canine. Holds us safe. Once we start running, nothing can stop us.

Occasionally, a possum or some smaller mammal such as a mole or a vole (I cannot tell you the difference) will lure The Dog away from me, but his detours are brief. At that hour, even such creatures as moles have better places to be than the dark road. Not us. Piercing the darkness, our mission is singular - to run full out.

We run on clear nights, cloudy, full moon and where there is none. We run in rainstorms, drizzle and early snow. We've seen the northern lights, meteor showers, and once a black bear and her cubs crossing the road at the cemetery gate, at which point I held tight to The Dog for both our sakes.

Except for the rhythm of our breath, we are silent. We know by now which way the road curves, places where the rain has washed the shoulder away. We both look for the view of the farmhouse at Kent's Corners that always keeps the light on (for us, we imagine, on those moonless nights). As the town disappears behind us and the quiet moves in, I think I would do anything for The Dog. Anything he asked. I imagine diving into the road to save him from a speeding car or pulling him from the jaws of a coyote. But perhaps I am only reading his thoughts. Of the two of us he is the most brave.

Only once did The Dog refuse to join me. I regret to say I tried to coax him with a piece of apple, for The Dog loves apples, but he would have none of it. He sat stoically on his front porch as I jogged off alone. I assured myself he had good reason, but still I wondered. Had I done something to offend him? Did I smell bad?

Maybe he disapproved of my outfit-an unstylish assortment of my husband's oversized t-shirt, shorn pajama bottoms and a pair of ragged high tops. But I should have known better. The Dog is no respecter of fashion. He is no shallow creature. He was keeping watch over Sara, who was ill, staying at his post until dawn.

We saw one another, The Dog and I, in the daylight hours. As I pulled out of the driveway on my way to work, he'd sit in his front yard and nod to me, or so it seemed. We acknowledged one another, of course, but he'd never run up to me as he did in the night and I never walked over to speak to him. We kept our silent code.

There came a time when my family and I left that idyllic pocket of central VT for the city of Burlington. Exchanged the dirt roads for paved. The quiet nights for sirens and students and general bustle of a college town.

In those last weeks of fall before the move, I ran as much as I could with The Dog. I didn't have the courage to tell him I was leaving, but maybe he knew. On our last run together, we took a new route, veering off at the Hollow Church and winding our way up to the old railroad bed. A place I'd always been afraid to go on my own. There was a legend of a train wreck and a ghost who still walked the rails. It was a lonely place, to be sure, but The Dog knew none of this. He ran back and forth along the bed, kicking up leaves, filling the air with the scent of fresh mint. Flushing out a starling in the underbrush. I'd never seen him happier.

As we rounded the bend for home that night and the village came into view, I heard The Dog sigh. I'd heard him sigh before. A sigh, not unlike a human sigh, but that night it was different. A sigh of longing I thought. And I wondered if like me, he wished we could start all over again.

As far as I know, The Dog still lives with Sara, sleeping under the stars. Perhaps another night runner has come along to take my place. Perhaps not. I have given up my midnight runs. No soft dirt. No possums. No Dog. I am a day runner now. When night comes to the city, we close the house up tight, turn the lights on, exchange the shadowy sidewalks for a cozy book by the fire. But, The Dog is with me still in my dreams. And, as I always suspected, he is the one pushing me out of the way of speeding cars, saving me from skunks and other dangers of the back road. He is the brave one. He is the hero. Some nights, he runs with me until dawn, not leaving my side until I am safely home. Exhausted and happy. A light sweat on my skin, dirt on my feet. Song of crickets in my ears.