

From
The Moon of Letting Go
and Other Stories
by Richard Van Camp,
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Dogrib Midnight Runners

I guess how we got this whole thing started was I was sitting at the trailer one night thinking about Justin, thinking about his life. There was this article they ran in the Community News a few years back where his folks announced that Justin had graduated with honours from Aurora College in Yellowknife. There was a picture of him smiling away with his big glasses and puffy hair just as proud as could be, and I remember raising a glass for him. Even though I never went away for schoolin' or ever really travelled, I remember feeling happy that someone was putting Fort Smith on the map.

It was then that I remembered something funny about Justin, the one thing that puzzled me about him: when Justin had a little too much to drink, he loved to streak. That's right. He'd get a glow on at the Buffalo Lounge, go into one of the stalls, take off all of his clothes except his socks, runners and glasses. He'd put his clothes, wallet and belt into a Northern bag and leave it for Country, the bouncer, to come get after Justin made a run for it.

And he'd run, boy. Justin'd run naked through the bar with the biggest smile on his face and everyone would start whooping it up and clapping. The guys would shake their heads and the women would stand to get a good look at him. I only saw him do it a few times but I know he did it quite a bit this past year. The paper ran a few articles on him and they called him The Slave River Streak: "Sources tell the Community News that 'The Slave River Streak' has struck again, running through the potato field last Saturday night at midnight."

Things like that.

One night, me, Brutus and Clarence were cruising around looking for a bush party when we seen this white bum running down the highway.

"Oh God," Clarence said.

Brutus shook his head. "I seen it all now!"

I squinted. Sure enough, it was Justin running down the highway. We all started laughing. Justin was running pretty good—found his groove, I guess. We pulled up alongside him and I was riding shotgun. When I rolled down the window—I'll never forget this—it was a full moon and there was this sheen of sweat on Justin's chest and shoulders. We started whooping it up and calling out to him but he didn't look at us. I seen his puffy hair bob with each bounce and I saw the moonlight shine off his glasses. I never told the boys about this, but when I seen his eyes, I swear to God they were closed. Justin was running blind in the moonlight on the highway outside of town with a smile on his face. It was like a smile you see in church from someone who totally believes. It was a smile that scared me because it was a smile I don't think I ever had or shared. So there we were howling away and Justin kept running....



His death really hit me hard. I kept thinking, "What broke you, Justin? What could have been so bad that you couldn't ask for help?" I felt for his folks, his woman. I thought to myself, "Let them find peace, Lord. Every single one of them."

I remembered Dad used to say that when the Creator takes a life, he gives two. But what happens when we take our own? It was sad and I couldn't shake it. I thought, "If Justin could kill himself with all he's done in his life, what's to stop anyone else?" He was white, healthy, came from a good family, had money, had Sarah, had work—what could have been so bad?

One night I was sitting home watching TV, sipping coffee and I started to wonder: what was it in the streaking that Justin felt so good about that he'd run with his eyes closed? And what did that feel like—to no longer be able to fight the urge to go for it? What was it like the first time he'd gone for it and made it to the Buffalo Lounge bathroom and dropped his drawers? And what was that first morning after like—opening his eyes and smiling, greeting the day, knowing he'd done it?

It'd been a rough year for me. I just couldn't seem to get on with anything. No job. The thought of one exhausted me. I couldn't stand the thought of making someone else rich or cleaning up after anyone and so every day I'd get up knowing everyone was gettin' paid but me. The past six months I kept saying: "Something good's gotta happen, Lord. Something good. Please."

I thought of Justin again and that smile I seen, and I figured I wanted to try it. What did I have to lose?

I walked out to the back porch of the trailer and took my clothes off. I slowly opened the door and peaked out. In my part of town, at the Caribou Trailer Court, there's starlight like you wouldn't believe. I saw the Big Dipper. Orion. After making sure nobody was around, I crawled naked down my stairs and knelt in my socks and runners. I listened and all I could hear were the rapids far away and my heartbeat racing. "No turning back," I thought. Thank God I had a fence and thank God they hadn't completed the subdivision out back. Finally, I stood and looked around. Then I walked around in the soft grass. "My God," I thought, "there are no bugs." Maybe they were all at the bush parties.

I hadn't run since high school and sure felt it when I jogged around the yard a few times, but I felt good. I felt giddy and light. I also felt more alert than I had in years. I started running a little faster and started feeling a little sexy. I was glad Sheena, my neighbour to the right, and her kids were down south for the summer. My other neighbour—what's her name—had left town and had put her trailer up for sale but, so far, there'd been no takers at all.

So there I was, buck naked—except for my runners and socks—and it was a beautiful night. I opened my gate and jogged behind my house to the east side of the trailer park, through the bush trails. I ran there because they hadn't put up streetlights yet. I ran and started to feel really good. Really *spry* as Coach used to say. I started running and that goddamned German shepherd Snoopy, owned by Lucas Spears, come running out growling at me. The first thing I did was freeze and cover my nuts. I guess Snoopy didn't quite know what to do with me. Here was a skinny, out of shape Dogrib standing there, not moving. He come over and sniffed around.

"Hi, Snoopy." I whispered. As far as I could see, all the house lights were off for the whole street. "Good boy. Where's your daddy?" He tilted his head and I reached out and petted him. Pretty soon he was wagging his tail and he followed me back to my house. I went in and shut the door. *Whew*. That was close. Imagine the Community News getting a hold of that one: "Dog bites Dogrib! (The Tlicho was naked to boot!)"

But it wasn't enough. I had a taste of something. I started to feel a glow inside. So I went back outside. Snoopy was gone but the stars were still shining. I wanted to run again. By this time it was 1:30. Monday. A school night. A work night. Families were asleep. The gas station was closed. The only folks out would be the cabbies, the card players and the partiers—and they'd be out at the landslide or in somebody's home.

I listened. No cars. All I felt was the warm breeze and it felt luxurious. This was it. *Now or never*. I gave 'er down the street and, before I knew it, I was streaking through the back roads of town. I stayed by the bushes in case a truck came around the corner or if there were any stragglers coming home from the bar. I guess the good Lord above took a shine to me because there was no one around. I ran for what seemed like a solid hour and felt something soothingly close to peace.

That night, I had the best sleep I'd had in months. I slept so good and woke up buzzed. I even got up and said a prayer.

I prayed for Justin and I prayed for his family. I prayed for his girlfriend and I prayed for my ex. I prayed for my dearly departed parents. I prayed someone special would soon come my way.

That day I went out and started looking for work. I needed to get out of my head, interact, make some dough.

But before I knew it, the day had passed and I was home, had supper, did dishes, put the coffee on. I was re-reading some Stephen King when I felt it: the night was calling me. She was calling me through my open windows. I could hear her in the rumbling of the frogs out past the highway. My blood was humming and I stripped down in my bathroom. I even tried ten push-ups and ten sit-ups.

I went out in the back yard and did ten jumping jacks. I was feeling pretty good. I decided to stick to my trail from last night. I looked around and took off slowly. I felt like a Dogrib ninja in stealth mode. I started picking up the pace, got into a good jog—then something ran up growling behind me. I stopped and covered up. "Oh God," I said. There was Snoopy, right beside me. He come up to me and started sniffing around.

"Good boy, Snoopy. Good boy. Wanna run with me?"

I don't know why I said that, but he went from maybe wanting to bite me to ears up, wagging his tail. So that was how Snoopy and I became running buddies. We ran together for a week and we loved it. Our territory grew each night. We ran from the Welfare Centre to Indian Village. I kept having this urge to do like Justin and run across the potato field because that was the heart of our community. If I could run across there I'd feel pretty good about streaking through the field that most townies walked across every day. It would be my little victory. But no: that would take time and a lot of daring. So Snoopy and I turned around and started running back home. Again, the stars were out and there was that warm breeze. I could hear the rapids far off and wondered what it would be like to run up the landslide on a night when there were no partiers. I was pretty sure that'd feel great, feel wonderful.

I remember Snoopy and I were just pulling up to my house when the headlights hit me. Full force. From what's her name's house. Her parking lot. *Highbeams!* Then I heard laughter. I froze and covered up, having an immediate heart attack. Snoopy bolted home.

"Grant!" Brutus called out. "What in the hell are you doing?" Clarence was laughing so hard he fell out of the passenger door. "You..." he kept saying, "You shoulda seen... your face...."

I got so mad I gave them the finger with my free hand and stormed inside my house. I was so ashamed for being caught that I took a shower. I was in there for a while.

"How cheap," I thought. "Isn't this typical? You find something that's all yours, that's magic and people come and twist it." Now I'd be the laughing stock of Fort Smith. I was stupid to think I could have something just for me.

After I was done showering, I went into my room and got dressed. There was no way I was going to sleep anytime soon. I got dressed and sat down in the living room. There was a quiet knock on the door. "Go away," I said.

Again, there was a knock.

"I mean it you guys," I said. "Go home."

The door opened and in walked Brutus and Clarence. They were smirking and I gave them the stink eye, shaking my head as turned up the TV. The boys went to my fridge and opened it up. stared at the screen and flicked through the channels. Brutus came around the couch and handed me a Coke. I realized how dry I was, so I took it and we popped ours open at the same time, just like always.

We all took long sips and I felt the burn. We always had this contest to see who could chug the longest and it was Brutus who always won. This time it was no different. I came up for air first, Clarence came second and Brutus closed his eyes and downed half the can. After it was done, we all raised our Cokes and thought of the women we wanted most. We'd done this since grade nine. I hit ~~me~~ and thought of the new Constable's wife.

Now that our ritual was over, Brutus looked at me seriously and Clarence covered his mouth to stop from bursting out laughing. "Grant," Brutus said. "Want to tell us why you're running naked with Lucas Spears's dog?"

Clarence burst out laughing and slapped his knees. "I'm sorry," he kept saying. "You shoulda... you shoulda... Grant... you shoulda... seen your face... when we caught you."

I don't know how Brutus did it but he kept his most serious face on and didn't move while Clarence fell off the couch behind him. And that was when I burst out laughing. I laughed so hard I started rolling around my couch. Clarence would get going and we were practically in sync with our stops and starts. I'd look up and Brutus would be looking at me, breathing through his nostrils, trying not to laugh.

And that only made me laugh harder.

After a while, I sat up, wiped my eyes and put on a serious face.

And then I told them. I told them everything. I told them about Justin and reminded them about catching him streaking that one night out on the highway, and, for the first time in forever, there were no jokes, no sarcasm, no punch lines. The boys listened as friends. It was Clarence who looked down first and started tracing his finger over the lip of his Coke. Brutus looked down second. I realized that this was the first time since Justin's funeral we had been this sombre, and so I spoke about what a great week I'd been having.

"Well that's why we came by," Clarence said. "We haven't seen you around."

"I been looking for work," I said. "I'm feeling good. I wake up and I want more, you know? I'm tired of drinking, being broke, not having a job. I'm tired of being lonely."

Clarence looked at me and looked at Brutus. "Sounds good to me."

Brutus looked at both of us but didn't say anything. He took a sip of his Coke and Clarence and I did the same. After we were done, Brutus raised his can and said, "For Justin."

That was a week ago. And now our ritual is as follows: we gather at my house at midnight, strip down in my porch. Brutus leaves his clothes on my washer. Clarence leaves his clothes on my dryer. I leave my clothes on the water heater. At first, it was funny: all three of us naked in my backyard warming up.

I was surprised that out of all of us Brutus was in the best shape. He traps, hunts—good Participation, I guess. The first couple of nights Clarence got so thirsty I wondered if he was going to make 'er. But he did. To my delight, we tackled the landslide and ran right by a party in progress (nobody saw, thank God). We even streaked across the potato field. We had contests to see who could touch all four stop signs at the four-way. Guess what? I won!

On our first run together it was Clarence who reminded me of something I had completely forgotten. "Remember Leonard?" he asked.

"Our babysitter?"

"Yeah."

"What about him?"

"Remember that time he told us about his little gang of roller skaters?"

I looked up. "I remember something. Go on."

"He said that he and his girlfriend and a bunch of their buddies would go roller-skating at midnight and they'd all put on that song, *Come on Eileen* by Dexy's Midnight Runners. 'Member?"

"Oh yeah," I said, "and the cops would try and chase them. I had forgotten that part."

That's when Clarence pulled out a CD. "I burned the song. Wanna crank it?"

"Sure," I said. "Put 'er in."

So there we were all getting undressed while singing along to *Come on Eileen*.

It became our anthem. There we'd be: in my backyard with two speakers aimed out my bedroom window: naked, rocking back and forth singing: "Come on Eileen!" And we'd all raise an

We raised our Cokes: "For Justin."

"When are you going again?" Brutus asked.

"What?" Clarence and I asked together.

"You heard me: when are you going again?"

I studied Brutus in a glance. He was being serious. "I go after midnight. The bugs die down then and there's a warm breeze."

"Can I come next time?" Brutus asked.

I saw something in Brutus I hadn't seen before. All our lives, we'd had everything I wanted: best Star Wars toys, best bikes, best guns, cool trucks, and, for the first time, he wanted something I had found. He and I had always competed in our quiet way for leadership in our little group and it felt nice to be asked by the boss. "Sure," I nodded.

Clarence looked at Brutus and then he looked at me. "Wait a minute. Are you guys serious?"

I looked to Clarence. Ever since we were kids, Clarence had always puppy-dogged us.

"I'm serious," Brutus said. "I'd like to try it."

"Well, I'm coming too," Clarence said, and he said it like he always had, like a little brother.

"Okay," I said. "But don't tell anyone. Come over at midnight tomorrow."

Clarence raised his hand.

"What?" I asked.

"Um," Clarence paused, "does Snoopy have to come along?" Brutus started laughing. "Why, Clarence? Are you scared he's gonna get hungry for wieners and beans, or what?"

We had a good laugh about that one.

"He's been running with me for a week," I said. "He likes it."

"Can't we do this without him? I mean, what if he gets hungry?"

"Think of him as our little guardian," Brutus said. "We're Dogribs, after all."

That put a nice spin on it. Clarence liked that. So we raised our Cokes and polished them off together.

maginary glass and say the next line: "And we can sing just like our fathers." Once we were all warmed up, we'd walk out into my driveway and there'd be Snoopy waiting patiently for all of us. We'd all give him a pet and, for some reason, he'd always run beside me. Maybe because I was the founder of our group.

So this was our agreed ritual: Monday night was run-for-your-ex night; Tuesdays we ran for our parents; Wednesdays we ran for everyone in town; Thursdays we ran for our ancestors; Fridays was happy hour—you could run for whoever you wanted; Saturdays was run for no cancer or diabetes; and Sundays was run for the Creator and all our blessings.

Tonight we cranked our anthem as we warmed up and let ourselves out into the driveway. No moon but she was going to be another glorious evening.

"Friday," I said. "Who are we running for tonight?"

"For Beth," Brutus said. "I really screwed her over. I'm hoping she's happy."

"She got married, huh?" I asked. "To that guy in Chip?"

He nodded. "I heard he was a good guy. I hope they have a great life."

I nodded. "Okay," I took a big breath and looked at my buddies. "Well, it's been a week running with you rowdies and I think it's only right that we give thanks to Justin and his family who inspired all of us."

"Ho," Brutus said, but Clarence was quiet.

We turned to Clarence and he was looking away. "For Belinda," he said.

"Belinda?" Brutus asked.

Clarence nodded.

I was curious. "Why Belinda?"

"You're in love or what?" Brutus asked as he stretched.

"She's pregnant," Clarence said.

Brutus and I froze. I seen a tear shine off the tip of Clarence's nose.

"What?" I asked.

He nodded. "She told me she was pregnant."

"When was this?" Brutus asked.

I walked over to Clarence. Brutus did the same.

Clarence kept looking down. "She called me this morning."

"I thought she was with Randy," Brutus said.

Clarence shook his head and held his hand over his eyes. "They broke up months ago."

"Holy," Brutus asked. "What you gonna do?"

That was it. Clarence started to cry quietly. I reached out and felt Clarence's back and Brutus did the same. I couldn't look at Brutus because if he was crying, that'd be it. I'd lose it.

"Hey hey," Brutus said. "It's okay, Clarence. We can help you. You made us uncles, buddy." Brutus had tears in his eyes.

"I'm scared," Clarence said. "I'm not ready to be a dad yet."

I blinked my tears away. "Yeah. You're not alone, Clarence. We can help out."

Clarence wiped his eyes. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. Can we just run?"

"Sure, buddy," I said. "Let's go."

Snoopy was sitting on my lawn, waiting patiently for us to begin.

"Ready?" I asked and looked to my buddies.

"You lead," Brutus said.

I nodded. "We can swing by Belinda's house."

Brutus looked down. "Swing is right."

We all snickered. Even Clarence. Snoopy started wagging his tail.

Belinda was west. We'd streak by there later. Tonight, I wanted the highway, just like Justin. Tonight, I was going to tell the boys to run blind. Tonight, I wanted to feel it: sweat on my shoulders, full on filled with peace. Tonight, I wanted to feel it all, just like Justin did. "*Zunchlet*," I said. "Let's go."

So we ran.