

## S P E E D R U N

by aj earle

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In the early morning, the woods are still dark despite the dawnlight creeping over the mountains. I used to run into the pines while the sun rose, along well-worn trails that had been etched out by a thousand runners past, and I used to think to myself how lucky I was.

How fortunate I was to hide away from the world like this, isolated and invisible.

I lost myself in the darkness, in the steady, rhythmic pumping of my legs. The leaves were turning, I remember, on my last morning run, and the pale sunlight that fought through the trees casted a warm glow over the red and gold leaf piles covering the wet ground.

I hadn't been running for anything. I had only been running because running is *zen*, because it is *mindless*, and at the end of my run I could trick myself into thinking emptiness was an accomplishment.

But I don't run in the mornings anymore.

...

I had my first beer at someone else's graduation party and didn't stop drinking for ten years. I'd wake up in the morning panicking about what I couldn't remember, my head still laden with alcohol, scrambling for my phone to see who I had called at 3 a.m, the shame burning like a caged fire in my chest.

It was the same panic I had then on my last morning run, the instinct of something wrong permeating the air, but I couldn't figure out what.

I stopped in the middle of a dirt path, lungs aching and knees sore, the trees looming overhead with their spindly branches whipped bare by the wind. Goosebumps erupted along my arms, nausea bubbling at the back of my throat.

Had I done something?

Had I forgotten?

Had I been here before?

Something shifted to the right of me, half-hidden in the half-light, a mass of stone and moss that clacked and clicked, settling like a rockslide. A boulder sliding along on its own power, grinding to a halt when I stiffened in terror.

The troll opened one eye, then another, and another, blinking lazily as it swiveled to stare at me.

*Be careful out here, human. The Other runs fast, too.*

...

I haven't gone into the woods since then.

I stand at my window instead, looking out into the brooding forest, thinking of the rocky troll and how to tell if I've finally gone insane.

I climb into my truck sometimes to go into town, to gather supplies for the approaching winter, to see if anyone notices if I'm crazy.

And it's at the grocery store later when I think of grabbing a six pack of beer. Maybe a light lager to dull the sharp creases of my mind, to blur the lines between what I know lives in the woods and whatever creature I saw that day, its warning still reverberating in my head.

The thought is insistent as I pull into the checkout line - *what's a few beers?* - and I remind myself that if I take the beer home and sink my teeth into can after can, I wouldn't be able to run as fast in the morning. Or as far. Or as hard.

I wouldn't be able to outrun the Other.

Not that I've been running.

I would waste a whole day, too, drinking and watching and thinking.

For what? A headache and the pang of loneliness that comes with it?

There are no not-cute boys to impress here, no pedantic arguments to defend. There is no one to gaslight me out here, except myself.

I ignore the saliva collecting in my mouth at the thought of the cold beer and wheel my groceries to the truck.

*The Other runs fast, too.*

...

When I was younger, I had fallen in with a group where I was expected to be small. Or at least, smaller than the rest.

*You're too loud at this party for the downstairs neighbors, they used to say.*

*It was a joke.*

*You just don't get it.*

*Useless.*

And that's if they said anything to me at all, of course. There were moments where I tried to remember if I had spoken aloud, if I had said anything, since I had been met with silence.

But I tried to fit, because we were friends, right? Because what else was there other than belonging? And I used to think I belonged to that world, where I was small.

The oncoming winter demands firewood and I haul a few logs out back to chop. There is a light sheen of snow on the ground when I swing the ax into the first wooden log, splitting it in two. The sweat on my forehead prickles but I don't wipe it away.

It feels good to feel something.

My lungs burn with the effort but I keep going, chopping logs into smaller and smaller pieces, knowing what it feels like to be shredded into nothing.

I gasp for air afterwards, shuddering in the frigid wind, my jacket soaked through.

In the forest, I can feel it watching.

...

All but the pines are naked when I return to the woods. The midday sun peeks through the trees and illuminates the trail as I run as quietly as possible, avoiding branches and crunching leaves, breathing slow and steady.

I retrace my steps to where I had last seen the troll, hoping that it hadn't gone too far in the weeks I've been away. I find that it has rolled into a small grove, covered in white and unmoving, its monolithic form somehow comforting. I'm not-small, too.

I tap the smooth rock gently, one gloved index finger prodding the stone.

"Hello?"

The boulder shivers, snowflakes falling off its sides in sheets as it cracks open its three eyes. The troll blinks, focusing on me.

*Hello, again. You've come back.*

I swallow against the lump in my throat. So I *am* fucking crazy.

“Are you - are you real?”

It laughs like gravel pouring into a bucket, cascading and echoing.

*As real as the pebble stuck in your shoe.*

“Should I be afraid out here?”

*Well now, isn't that always the question?*

“I mean - what else is here?”

*The Other*, it says, sighing.

*It runs and runs and runs.*

*Just like you.*

...

My alarm chirps in the dying sunlight, signaling that the evening is imminent.

The troll fell silent a few days ago, maybe sleeping for the winter, maybe returning permanently to the earth, I'm not sure. But it offered nothing else about the Other and it is too quiet in this house to keep staring out the window.

And so I pull on my running shoes, the ones stained with muck and dirt, and head out to the woods as the sun dips below the horizon and the sky churns with storm clouds. It runs and runs and runs, just like me. Maybe it knows what the emptiness feels like, maybe it can tell me what the void is and how to fill it.

My headlamp's light is watery and feeble against the encroaching darkness, its light bouncing with every step. I fall into my familiar, dependable pace, careful still to dodge fallen twigs. A black blanket envelops the forest in only a few minutes and still I keep running, keep focusing on my breath, on my lungs straining with the icy breeze.

The panic builds along my spine, slow and firm, until it reaches my skull and burns behind my eyes.

It's here.

I can hear the Other, trampling branches behind me as it approaches, its own legs falling into a pattern. I can feel its rancid breath, humid and starkly warm against the winter chill.

I rush along the path, terror and fever ripping at my heels. This is no time to be small.

The steady rhythm of my steps is abandoned and I dart through the trees, primal fear fueling the inferno in my chest, forcing me to run faster and faster.

I can hear the Other snapping its jaws and following just close enough to nearly bite, only a touch too slow to break my neck.

I laugh, breathless in the darkness.

C'mon, then, friend.

You run and run and run.

Just like me.

...

I run at night now.

I crash through low branches and skid through muck-laden leaves, jerky and frantic and not-small. I sprint on weary legs, willing the muscles to push farther and farther until they're on the edge of snapping like taut wire. I hurtle through the woods at a tearing, wild speed, and I entice the Other into a chase.

We run and run and run.

And I have been lucky enough to feel the Other's teeth nipping at the base of my skull, to have seen its claws grasp tree trunks to propel itself forward.

My sprinting is not that of a deer, delicate and graceful, but more of a boar who has devoured her brood and is still hungry, challenging the hunter to catch me, agony and euphoria tugging at my core.

One day maybe the Other will rip my ribcage open like a birthday present and my blood will stain the pines like an ocean wave. Maybe they'll tear out my heart and see how it beats in the dawnlight.

I don't have to look behind me to know the Other is close now, huffing with the effort of keeping up, its stale breath sticking to the back of my neck.

I run deeper into the forest, knowing that the sun is a long way off.

C'mon, friend, is that all you've got?