

Thank You, Junebug

[Author's Note: Rich Benyo gives me free reign with this column, and I usually choose to mix things up, writing a bit about my own trail-running adventures as well as the goings-on of the trail and ultrarunning community. With this column, this one time, I'm writing about a significant event in my personal life, the recent death of my dog, Junebug.]



You must know I am looking for a dog like you. It's a fall day in 2001 at a shelter in San Angelo, Texas. The other dogs are complete nutters—barking, leaping, running circles, cowering in the corner of their kennel—just as you would expect a dog to behave in this strange and unhealthy environment. But you sit quietly, your furry tail swishing back and forth across the dirty concrete floor and your eyes focused on me.

You're a young adult that was left by your owner, but the shelter workers don't know why. I pet you, and you put your head on my thigh and nuzzle closer. I know so little about border collies—just that Texans use them with their sheep and goats—but the folks at

the kennel assure me that you'll be a good running dog.

San Angelo is five hours from where I live in Texas now, so I take you on an overnight trial at a hotel. The next morning, I tie up my running shoes and put you on a leash, and we head onto the town's quiet streets. I can tell you've never been on a leash or an organized run, but you learn in about 1.2 seconds to trot on the right side of my body and one stride ahead.

At 23 years old, I am just a pup, too. All I really know now is that I love to run and live for time in wild places. You choose me. I choose you. And together we run toward unknown adventures ahead.

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It is a warm winter's morning in Big Bend National Park, Texas, where we live and I work. It's 2004, and I'm training for the Austin Marathon. You and I head out for an 18-miler on jeep roads. Our nine-mile turnaround point is a spring at which I plan to water you and refill my bottle.

But about 8.5 miles in and just before the road drops into a drainage with the spring, a mountain lion ambles

across our path. You bark and whine like you've seen another dog or a rabbit or something with which you would like to play. Instead, you capture the attention of the largest predator in this desert ecosystem.

The cat turns, watches, and then follows us. I soon realize that the animal has eyes for you, ears and tail flicking. My momma-bear instinct kicks in, and I am ready to fight. I chuck rocks, big rocks, the lion's way. I'm so jittery that they go every direction but the right one. A few get close enough to the cat that it skitters out of view for minutes at a time. But it keeps coming back.

I act out scenarios in my head of how we will end our standoff. One involves bashing the cat on the head with a rock if it gets close. I think, *I could do that, if I have to*. Another involves unclicking the leash from your collar and giving the lion what it wants. I think, *I won't do that, not even if I have to*. I am flushed with relief when, 45 minutes of standoff later, a jeep drives up and to our rescue.

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You and I now live at Yellowstone National Park, and I take you running on the trails and dirt roads of the national forests surrounding the park. I carry in my hand a big can of bear spray, and I sing loudly when the greenscape closes in. Sometimes we run with friends, other people and dogs, but often it's just you and me.

It's September 2007, and it's bow-hunting season for elk. I wear a bright orange vest, though I don't really need to because it's midday and all the hunters are in the coffee shops talking about their dawn hunts.

You and I run a couple of miles out a flat dirt road. You always pull for the first mile or two as if to say, "Let's get this show on the road!" And then you settle in, right there on the right, with the leash slack and your eyes on the land ahead. Three miles out is a creek you always run into for some laps of water and a full-on lay if it's really hot. Just after this, a rocky, steep, rutted jeep road turns off the main dirt drag and heads for the hills. So do we. We can

climb 1,500 feet in two miles here, a good afternoon workout.

Not far up the hill, you begin behaving oddly, slowing to a stop. You look to me, then ahead, then to me again. I encourage you, “Junebug, let’s go!” You go because that’s the border col-lie way. You don’t last long, though, because instinct sings another song. We repeat this stop-encourage-go process a couple of times and then you decide enough is enough.

You turn and stand in front of me, blocking my path forward. It has taken me a few minutes to understand your dog language: you don’t want us to go any farther. Chills cascade down my spine and we run like hell back down the road.

Tomorrow, a bow hunter will be gravely injured by a grizzly bear while hunting next to this road. The forest-service investigating officials will later say that the grizzly might have been in the area feeding on partial elk carcasses left by other hunters. Today, Junebug, your instinct is perhaps our lifesaver.

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We are trail running in the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada. You’re not much of a go-off-and-sniff-stuff explorer; you always like to be near my side. So I worry mostly about you getting covered in the poison oak that lines every trail here, in our new home, and not so much about you falling off a giant rock. But that’s what’s just happened—you slipped six or seven feet off a boulder and onto another rock—and you won’t get up.

One of your feet is bleeding a little, but that seems inconsequential to the fact that you’re lying unmoving on your side. We’re more than eight miles out from the trailhead, and I know from experience that there is rarely anyone else on this trail. I cry because I don’t know what else to do.

I soon realize that I can and will carry you out. It takes me a while to figure out how to do this. You’re big; I’m little; we have a long way to go. Eventually, I pick you up so that your front legs are atop my shoulders and your rear legs are around my waist, as I might pick up and hold a 4-year-old kid. I loosen the straps on my hydration pack all the way and put it on backward, on the front of my body. With its loose straps, I’m able to angle the pack down so as to create a sling for your bottom. I wrap my arms around your body and the hydration pack. This is as good as it gets, so we go.

Carrying you eight miles is very hard. Your fur sticks to the sweat on my arms, neck, and face. I reason that, now that I’m halfway, I’ll sit for a break. Your slinged bottom comes to rest on my lap, and you immediately begin to fling yourself around. You want down now. I try to transition you to the ground because I’ve made up my mind that you must have a broken back, but you’ll have nothing of that. You help yourself to the ground in a leap, shake yourself off, and stand there staring at me as if to this time say, “I’m all right now. I am!”

We take off walking first and then running. I’m crying again because



▲ Junebug and the author on a short hike above June Lake in California's Sierra Nevada, July 2010.

I thought it was really bad, but now we're just doing the same thing we've always done.

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It's 2010. I have no idea how many miles your little feet and eyes and heart have seen. But you've run all over this gosh-darned country, seen and smelled more of it than some humans ever will. You've run in Texas, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Minnesota. I'm probably missing more.

I learned not long after you became mine that you had had surgery for a broken femur and that you had a permanent pin and some wire in there, holding things together. You've got a teensy hitch in your gait that comes

from your left front leg making up for a slightly stiff rear left leg. That makes your years of running far all the more spectacular, but you're now arthritic in both of those appendages.

I've been taking you on my runs less and less often, just once or twice a week instead of every day. You no longer come home after a run, collapse on the carpet for a one-hour nap, and then pop up ready for more. It takes you much longer to recover now.

Today, instead of running, we're standing in the shallow water of California's Merced River. Every now and again you put your face in, even your eyes. Most dogs would do anything to keep their heads above water, but you love full submersion. I wonder what

you see under there. I toss a stick out into the river's quiet deeps and you swim after it, a lady possessed. Like a metronome, you swim the stick to shore, drop it, shake off, pick it up, and return to me in the water. We repeat this what feels like 764 times until we run out of time but not your energy. Water workouts don't tax your body like those of the land.

You have no idea that today I'm retiring you from running. We'll go on short runs together—two, three, maybe four miles—but your last long run has come and gone. We'll embrace elderly-dog things like slow walks for biscuits from the postmistress at the post office, sitting together in the sun on the front porch, and careful ball-fetching sessions that won't make your legs hurt. Truth be told, we've already been doing a lot of this, just by your changing, aging nature.

This transition seems natural to you, but it makes my heart hurt so I make it ceremonial, official here in this river. Welcome to retirement, old girl.

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It's early spring of 2012, and we're returning from a weekend in Moab, Utah, to our now home in Park City, Utah. We stop on the side of Highway 6 about halfway between Price, Utah, and Interstate 70. The landscape here is stark; a white clay soil is only lightly peppered with sagebrush and rabbitbrush.

I pull you from your backseat kennel and lower you onto the white clay. You can't get out on your own anymore.

You do the downward-dog stretch that all dogs do when they go from a place of confinement to a place of freedom, but your stiff self barely goes anywhere in this stretch anymore.

You're blind as a bat, and you're almost deaf, too. But one thing you can do is smell. You spend a half hour or so sniffing stuff, the detritus of historic humanity here—ancient glass bottles, a horseshoe, an old livestock holding pen that looks like it might still get occasional use. You sniff the stuff of nature, too—the hole atop a giant anthill, the sagebrush, the air.

You walk slowly almost everywhere you go now, but once in a while your little dog soul is inspired into a trot. I don't know what does it, but today is one of those days. You get your old-lady run on, able right front leg guiding arthritic left legs. Your tongue lolls from the side of your wide-open mouth, and your ears lie back against your head, the dog version of a smile. For a moment, you are free from the burden of age and we run together again.

As sudden as it comes, the fleeting glimpse of our past is gone, and you retreat into your slow, sniffing self. My heart almost breaks, but then it doesn't, and that's because I see that you're nonplussed by the whole damn thing.

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You are around 14 and one-half years old today, May 28, 2013. Five days ago, your left back leg—the one with the puppy war wound—stopped working. You can't get up from a ly-

ing position, and once you do, the leg hangs limp.

I'm helping you everywhere. You've always been a fiercely independent dog, only tolerating so much petting and cuddles. But now you accept all the help I give. You wake from your naps, wiggle around, and then look to me to help you up and outside or to your water bowl.

Last night, we took you on your last walk. We went about 200 feet, and it took at least a half hour. We gave you treats of elk jerky all day yesterday and cooked you a salmon fillet, your favorite, for dinner. You lay to sleep at the foot of our bed one last time.

This morning, we stop at the park on our way to the veterinarian's office and park your furry butt in the grass next to the sagebrush. You sniff the air, put up with us taking your photo, let your tongue loll out the side of your mouth, and collapse into the grass because you don't have the strength to sit up. Your eyes begin to shut like you feel a nap coming on.

After this, I lift you back into the car and we drive to the vet. I sign a form that gives my consent for the vet to euthanize you.

You walk into the office under your own power but on your own schedule. You take the time to give the other dog in the waiting room, a young, energetic creature, one hoarse bark, as if you're announcing your own departure. One of our quilts is here for you, and you lie on it as soon as we walk in. You usually

pace nervously at the vet; how do you know to lie down?

I hold your head and rub your furry cheeks, just below your ears. The whole time I am chanting, "Thank you, Junebug." I nod at the vet, and he injects a sedative in your leg that makes your head go limp in my hands and your eyes close about halfway. Next he administers the lethal injection. It happens fast, your death. The doctor puts a stethoscope to your chest to make sure, but you have been by my side for almost 12 years, so I already know you are not here anymore.

I heave and shake and bawl as the memories come. They rush like a flood, slamming me against some canyon wall. I think about how you used to sit in the trunk of my Toyota 4Runner, whining and panting and looking over the backseat, waiting for us to stop at some trailhead, somewhere, anywhere. I remember that time you figured out how to open doors and helped yourself to your own Yellowstone National Park adventure until a tourist found and returned you. I remember your last camping trip on Gooseberry Mesa in Utah. We made a campfire at night and you sidled up to it, discovered its warmth, and lay next to it for hours. After a few minutes, the flood recedes and the world quiets.

Your ancient body is here in my hands, but your spirit is already gone. I don't know where you are, but I know what you must be doing: running. And because you're running on, I will, too.