

DogGone

By Brian Schott

Every ski town has one, the dog that everyone knows. Whitefish, Montana had Jaeger. On Big Mountain chasing skiers or busting through the underbrush along some trail near the river, and especially on those high-speed, dog-powered skateboard runs across town, **this big, black lab mix was everywhere.** And running. His blood flowed like a river in June.

I first met Jaeger when I moved into a shared house with a guy I had just met named Ryan—Jaeger's owner. Our ensuing friendship ended up transferring directly to his dog. So a dozen years later, when my friend called to say that it was time, I said that I would be there. After 15 years, the river in Jaeger had become a trickle between a pile of rocks.

A crew of us, friends who had dug roots into Whitefish during that same winter of 1994, gathered in Ryan's living room and pored through piles of faded photos, laughing at how young we looked, how crazy we were, back then. Ryan cooked a T-bone and fed it piece by piece to Jaeger, on the floor. A last supper.

We hoisted shots of Maker's Mark and offered cheers, laughing about that night we spent on the side of a remote road after a breakdown in a snowstorm. Jaeger keeping me warm in the back of that old car until Ryan returned in the cab of a tow truck sometime after dawn. Jaeger the reason I eventually got two dogs of my own — mountain town companions to run hard with, chasing dreams like rabbits in their sleep.

The morning after the phone call, I wait with Ryan and his girlfriend Brooke in the paved parking lot behind the Whitefish Animal Hospital. The mountains to the north are enshrouded in clouds and a November sky spits a cold rain. The leaves have all fallen. Ski season lurks, but the snow is late. I intermittently pace from Ryan's Chevy Blazer to various points on the driveway, which is littered with winged maple seedpods. Jaeger lies in the back, and I pause on the arc of my walk to pet him and tell him that I love him. More pacing. I push helicopter seeds into damp little piles with my leather boots. And then the back door to the clinic creaks open. It's time.

From the front seat of the car I look back at the two vets as they quickly prep Jaeger. **This ninety-pound hound has had a full life,** running freely through Montana winters and chasing bears across Alaska summers. I can tell that he's ready, but I'm not. Brooke hugs Ryan as the veterinarian pushes the cocktail from the plastic syringe into Jaeger's left hind leg. Jaeger nods his head and then relaxes, does not complain as the needle bites. I look him in the eyes as his heartbeat begins to slow. The car seems way too quiet for a dog that howled to Springsteen tunes.

Ryan's tears drip onto Jaeger's massive paw like drops of mercury. The green light in Jaeger's eyes begins to fade as I fix my gaze on him. I don't want to let him go. I have never before witnessed the moment of death of another creature. It is a feeling void of electricity. "That's it," whispers Ryan. **The last light is gone in the old dog's eyes.**

Brooke and I stare straight ahead while I pilot the old car down the back roads out of town to the crematorium. I look in the mirror at Ryan with the body of his old friend, the larches that line the road still alight with their last golden needles. A mist settles on the windshield. We park next to a white cement building with a large, steel smokestack. Ryan carries the body into the building and lays it down on a table. A woman asks us if we need more time, but we leave as quickly as we have arrived.

Back home, I am tired when I hug my wife. I lie down on the bed with my three-year-old boy and we read books, then take a nap, side by side. A few hours later, the door opens and **our two big black dogs come crashing into the bedroom,** an explosion of wet noses, paws, and tongues.

My son laughs and Scout begins to bark. Abby jumps up on the bed, tail thumping and it's instantly a party. I scratch them behind the ears — they're ready to run. Outside, a light snow is beginning to stick. We bound out of the house into the falling snow, out into the mountains.



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