

The Jogger by Jenny Maloney

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As he has done for 68 years, the Jogger jogs.

He is tired.

He crosses the border into Alaska sometime around 6:00 a.m. He knows he's close because the smell hovers in the trees. Overhead, the pines, tall and towering, creak in the autumn wind. The days are normal now. There's a day and a night. He enters the state in the exact moment night gives way to day.

Taking a deep breath is out of the question because of the smell. But he wants to breathe deep. Soon, soon, he will move along the trails without suffering the scent of decay. Death.

For decades, it has surrounded him. It's in his clothes. It's in his skin—skin which should be wrinkled and cancerous by now. But he's as healthy as he was 68 years ago. Full head of hair. All his teeth. A deep tan. Not a single crow's line around his eyes. His muscles are long and stringy, which makes him seem taller—and he's already pretty tall. For all his youth and beauty, though, death is everywhere. He knows his smile doesn't reach his eyes anymore—plenty of women have given him the sidestep. His greetings to other joggers on the trail are met with stiff nods. He tries not to take it personally. Mortals sense mortality, that's all. He himself has been around so long he half-hopes a semi-truck will run him over. (Though his previous self-sacrificing efforts have never worked. He always wakes up and is always ready to jog.)

The Jogger moves uphill. Damp twigs refuse to crack underfoot. Drying mud puddles create a strange mix of cracked earth and slippery, skidding areas. The Jogger avoids these natural traps. He clears gnarled roots trying to trip him. He's off trail now. And, despite his efforts not to, he's breathing deeper.

Somewhere beyond the hill, there's a restaurant catering to locals. Bacon is frying. Sausage is sizzling. Smoke from a wood stove is trickling over the tree branches. Beneath the safe, inviting scents is something else. Rotting. Meat spoiling and sour. Even after 68 years, he gags at it. But he follows the smell.

Two miles later, he finds the boy, as he always knew he would. His skill at finding the dead has been impeccable for almost seven decades. He slows his pace and walks through the trees, coming out at a clearing on the edge of a long lake, appropriately named Ghost Lake. The boy is about fourteen, maybe younger, but maybe a small fifteen or sixteen. Shallow grave. More like a pile of leaves, as if a family had been raking and just left the kid alone to rot after he jumped in. The boy isn't a pile of bones. The Jogger can see strangulation marks on the discolored skin. This boy died in the last week, probably in the last couple days.

Now the Jogger must decide: report the body, eliminate the cursed smell, and keep jogging. Or wait. Because whoever did this will be back.

And that killer is his chance.



Every day he relives the night he became a Jogger.

Late at night. By an Alaskan lake not much different from Ghost Lake, where he wanders now. Back then, Alaska had been wilder. He didn't even see a paved road until he was twelve.

But by eighteen he'd seen roads. He was a university student. Anchorage. That night, he was out drinking with friends—including his new girlfriend.

Everyone was drunk. A giant bonfire on the lakeshore provided the limited light. Only a couple of people had thought to bring flashlights. The Jogger hadn't been one of them. He'd forgotten his flashlight at home, about two hundred miles north. The darkness outside of the heat and glow of the bonfire was almost complete. Clouds hung overhead, blotting out the stars. Wet, silty sand beneath his bare feet. The world was cold, the temperature dropping lower. But he was from Alaska. Cold didn't bother him. Half of the university group was wearing shorts, even in early September. The mosquitoes had accepted the temperature drop, mostly, but the hardier creatures still buzzed around his ear.

Somewhere in the music and flickering firelight, he lost track of his girlfriend—a young woman whose name the Jogger no longer remembers. He knows she had long, light-brown hair and hazel eyes. Pretty rather than beautiful. But flirty and physical—features which attracted the Jogger. Features which attract most men. He went looking for her, calling her name, the same name he can't remember. Someone told him she'd gone down the trailhead with a young man whose name the Jogger also doesn't remember. He wants to blame old age, but these two nameless people were memorable only because of what happened.

Branches hung low over the trail, cutting across his face. Sounds of the party receded behind him. Other sounds grew louder ahead of him. Soft sighs. Deep grunts. The rhythmic pumping. The Jogger saw the bare skin as a light shadow among deeper shadows. He was practically on top of them when he recognized her long, light-brown hair—her most distinguishing feature in a field of unremarkable features.

He yanked the other man off her. The young man's hair was pomaded and sticky.

The next few moments are still a blur in his memory even now, at the edge of Ghost Lake, sitting on the stump of a long-dead tree, at the edge of a trail not unlike that one. But he remembers his own fists were solid. His muscles were strong from years of living

in the Alaskan bush. He'd grown up in the wild, and the wild released in that moment. The Jogger had the other man's bloody, swollen face in his own bloody, swollen hands. The blood slick like motor oil. Hot, then cold and sticky. The girl—what was her name?—screamed.

Then someone leaped out of the darkness. He wore sneakers, long socks, athletic shorts, and no shirt. The Jogger felt long, lanky limbs around his neck. A stranglehold. A voice whispered in his ear.

"It's your turn."

The air disappeared. He passed out.

He woke the next morning somewhere deep in the woods.

The man who had jumped on his back the night before stood next to a tree. He still wore only athletic shorts—like a basketball player—and the long socks and running shoes.

"Get a good pair of shoes," the man said.

"What?" the Jogger said.

"A good pair of shoes. Your job, your punishment, is to find the lost. Follow your nose."

That was it—the only instructions he'd received.

Everything he learned came from some instinct, the way a stomach growls in hunger, like automatically seeking light in the darkness.

Now the Jogger picks up a rock, a smooth stone, and casts it out along the still surface of Ghost Lake. He watches until the ripples disappear and tries to ignore the smell.



The Jogger turns to the boy buried in the leaves. "You'll be found soon, kid. I'll make sure you're found. I just have to do one thing first."

Punishment.

His voice sounds rusty. Which isn't surprising—jogging doesn't require a lot of verbal communication skill. The most he ever speaks is when reporting his 'finds' to police officers, or park rangers, or by making anonymous calls to departments. Then he jogs on to find the next person.

They aren't all murder victims. Many are accidents. People who wander too far. Encounter animals they aren't equipped to encounter. Many get lost and die of

exposure. Sometimes there are car accidents. But it's always the Jogger who finds them. He runs along, hitting his stride, and then the smell comes on.

In the early days, he hadn't known what the smell was. He'd tried to run away from it—but the sensation makes him dizzy. He passes out if he tries to escape it. Once, he'd been discovered at the side of I-5 in Oregon. When some homeless guy had shaken him awake, the smell was so overwhelming, rich and meaty and ripe, he'd vomited on the man's shoes. After that, he followed his nose. Once he finds a person, inevitably dead, and reports the discovery, the vile stench goes away.

That's what Joggers do. Find the lost.

But the Jogger is tired. He's ready to pass on his punishment. The man in the athletic shorts cursed him. Now to be free, he must curse someone else. And who better to curse than a killer of little boys?



In the afternoon, the Jogger hunts down firewood. He doesn't need fire to live, but he does like to be comfortable. And Alaska's autumn nights get cold.

He finds a femur as he digs through the tree roots looking for firewood. Another boy. This site is very active. Whoever has hurt these boys will be back. It looks like the killer brings them and kills them all in this one place. A special death ground. He probably owns a cabin nearby. The Jogger knows the type—he has seen this kind of handy work in all kinds of environments. Deserts where the remains are mummified. Urban centers where the victim is abandoned near garbage scows. Dumpsters. Basements and crawl spaces. This kind of killer likes his privacy. Now that the Jogger has found him, the Jogger will pass on the responsibility of finding to him.

Punishment.

Because jogging is punishment. No pleasure. No pain. Just weariness.

He's atoned for his moment of violence. He's given peace to families who otherwise would not have had it.

He doesn't know if what he's trying will work. Doesn't know if stopping a violent act and saying 'It's your turn' will set him free.

He sits down near the leaf pile, lights his fire.

He sits until nightfall. The smell surrounds him now. He'll be sick soon. He swallows against the bile rising in his throat. Even if it takes days, weeks, he will wait for this murderer.

In the light of the rising moon, he does his stretches, more as a distraction than to undo any actual kinks. He bends forward, feeling the pull in his lower back, and feels something close to relief. Same when he stretches his hamstrings, which are in a perpetual state of tension. Those muscles are like tightly pulled rubber bands. After so many years on pavement, hard-packed dirt, up hills and down hills, he thinks he can feel the muscles fraying. But they carry him a long way every day without complaint. Not a single cramp. Same with his quadriceps. His calf muscles are long stretch-fibers Olympians would envy.

He breathes deep. The smell is getting stronger but he also smells the lake water, earthy and filled with fish. He tells himself the air is fresh enough.

The Jogger doesn't imagine he'll wait long. The type of man who pursues this type of hunting can't resist the impulse. It's a pleasure for this guy to bring his quarry to this stretch of ground, within sight of his previous victims. Probably gives him a perverted thrill.

But he must remain positive. He will stop this killer and punish him more than any police officer or prison warden. He will save this next boy and make sure the missing boys are found.



He stops stretching. Drops more wood on the fire. The smoke does a poor job of covering the rot hovering in the air. The heat is pleasant as the night air creeps in over the lake. Stars peek out between the trees.

After this, he'll stay in Alaska. Build a cabin. Plant a garden. Be peaceful and alone.

The Jogger wishes for marshmallows. He doesn't have to eat, but it gives him something to do. Gives him something to smell that isn't rotting flesh. Gives him something to taste that isn't car exhaust or road dust. He prefers sweet things. He always orders French toast or big skillet cookies from diners. Marshmallows would suit this situation nicely—a pleasant gooey way to spend the evening. He holds out a stick and puts the tip into the flames, letting it burn for a while, and imagines a marshmallow.

The waiting lasts hours. A soft wind stirs the leaves around the dead boy, shuffling tufts of hair still clinging to his scalp. The Jogger tries not to look at him, but the boy is just visible inside the ring of firelight. Flickering shadows sometimes make it look like the boy's mouth is moving, like he's trying to tell the Jogger something. To warn him.



Across the way, flashlights appear like fireflies flittering through the trees on the opposite shore. Two lights. Voices echo, one low and resonant, the other higher-pitched.

This is him. The killer. With his victim.

The Jogger rises. He's jogging before he thinks—which is truly always the case for him. He follows the beach because the route is smoother, even though running on sand is harder. But the water is high and the sand is wet, so his feet find traction. His shoes minimize the impact of his footfalls; it feels like he's moving along a cloud. His breath settles into an even patter and relaxes into it, despite the carcass-stench following him. The smell will grow and grow the longer he neglects reporting the missing boys in the clearing. But soon this won't be his duty. That honor will belong to the man who killed them—and if the killer refuses the demands of the curse, he will know ceaseless cramping and gut-tearing pain forever. Punishment.

Sections of the lakeshore are uneven, forcing him to go off-route into the trees. He slows down so he can pay closer attention to the ground. A stray root or rock will trip him up and alert the killer—who might kill the boy with him faster. He may as well end everything now if he can't save that boy.

The arch of the Milky Way glimmers through the treetops, lighting his way. He picks up his pace and veers back toward the beach.

Now he hears them:

"You've never had tequila before?"

"Nah. Whiskey though. I've had that."

Don't drink it, the Jogger thinks. But there's quiet and then a sputtering sound as the boy chokes on tequila heat for the first time.

"Hoooo—*whee!*" the man howls. His voice is magnified in the darkness. "First time! Popped your tequila cherry. No going back now."

The Jogger sees them now, not clearly because the strongest light is from the two flashlights, which seem like the thin pen-lights people attach to their keys. So the two appear as silhouettes outlined in bright white. They are living shadows. The man wears some kind of baseball hat, but that's the only detail the Jogger can make out.

"You can say that again," the boy says. Though he isn't much of a boy. Eighteen. Nineteen. A kid turning into a man.

The kid-man takes another swig from the tequila bottle. He doesn't sputter this time.

The Jogger stops behind a pine tree, gauging how quickly he can get to the man, who moves closer to the kid-man even as the Jogger watches. For a split second, the Jogger thinks this is the moment: the man is going to make his move. The man reaches out his arm and the Jogger steps out from behind his tree—just one step—but the man only takes the tequila bottle. The kid-man shines his pen-light into the man's face, illuminating the killer's visage. He has a beard, rough and scraggly like he can't grow a full one. Patches of reddish-brown hair sprout from his tan face.

"Put that down," the man says. He drinks in the mini-spotlight, blinking hard against the glare. He's already pretty drunk. Upon closer inspection, it surprises the Jogger the man is still standing. Must take a lot of liquor to talk himself into murdering.

The kid-man reaches for the bottle, but the man doesn't hand it over. He lets the kid-man grab the neck but then tugs the bottle and boy closer. The kid-man is close enough to get a full blast of second-hand tequila breath in his face. But he doesn't flinch. The Jogger has to give it to him—the kid-man holds his own. His bravado is impressive. The kid-man takes the tequila bottle and swallows another mouthful up close and personal with the man who plans to kill him.

"I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get into that boat," the kid-man says. His voice is low. Intimate.

The Jogger looks out at the lake. He doesn't remember seeing a pier or a boat during the day.

Then it clicks: there is no boat. That's the lure. *Wanna go for a ride on my boat?* That's what the man would say, tempting these younger men out for adventure. Go row around the lake. Have some beers. Some tequila. Adventure appeals to boys raised in the bush. Boozing and boating are two of the more popular pastimes. Throw in a gun and the Jogger knows you won't see them again until the beer or ammo runs out.

The pair start down the beach, toward the killing ground.

The two men move before him with no sense of impending disaster, both anticipating a good time, one not understanding how close Death stands near him.

They cross in front of his tree. The Jogger smells the citrusy tequila. The smell briefly overtakes the odor which haunts him.

But not for long.

In just a moment, the curse will belong to someone else.

He waits until they step just past him. The kid-man in front, then the drunk man, who nurses the tequila bottle. For a moment there is only the sound and alcoholic stench of their breathing, the gentle crush of their footsteps on wet sand, the lapping of wavelets.

“It’s just up ahead,” the kid-man says.

The Jogger times it perfectly—so perfectly. The man holding the tequila bottle takes a few steps past the tree, tilts his head up for another drink—he’s so close the Jogger can touch him with no extra effort. But he still tenses up, balling up those muscles which have run so many miles. He takes a breath, tastes death and tequila, and jumps onto the man’s back.

The man lets out a yelp. Drops the bottle. It lands on a stray rock and shatters. The sound is like a gunshot. The man’s yelp turns into a high-pitched scream. He doesn’t know if it’s a man or a bear on him—there are many, many wild things in this neck of the woods.

His scream is cut off by the Jogger’s lanky arms. They wrap around the man’s neck like ropes. The Jogger is possessed by a triumphant strength. He’s saved the kid-man. The lost boys will be found. He whispers,

“It’s your turn.”



Strangling a grown man until he passes out is more difficult than he figured, however. The drunken man’s panicked flailing almost sends them both into the lake. Water splashes at the Jogger’s dangling feet. The man’s boots are quickly soaked, so he can’t catch his balance. The man goes down to his knees. The Jogger goes with him. The Jogger’s knees dig into wet sand, but he doesn’t loosen his grip.

Finally, the man’s arms dangle at his sides. There’s no fight left in him. Just heavy, unsupported weight. Since they’re already low to the ground, the Jogger releases the man, who falls face forward. His head lands on a grassy section of earth while the wavelets lap at his boots.

“Who the hell are you?”

The kid-man stands a few feet away. He doesn’t look panicked, just confused. Sometime during the scuffle, he picked up the broken tequila bottle. He holds it by the neck in front of him, as if warding the Jogger off—probably one of the wiser moves the kid-man has made all evening.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” the Jogger says. “I’m here to help.”

The kid-man hesitates for a moment. He keeps the bottle out in front, but he doesn’t threaten. He’s thoughtful. “How’d you know we were out here?”

“That’s a long story.”

The kid-man holds his flashlight out, pointing it directly in the Jogger's eyes. The Jogger still hasn't gotten a good glance at the kid-man's features. He blinks against the glare. "Seriously, kid. I'm here to help. Let's get you back to civilization."

He holds out a hand.

The kid-man turns and runs. Deep orange afterimages are left where the flashlight glare had been just a moment earlier. Blinking hard, he runs after the kid.

He reaches the killing ground, where the two boys are resting not-in-peace. The kid-man has stopped and is staring at the smoldering campfire the Jogger left burning. The kid-man stands over the glowing embers. He points his flashlight at it, as if trying to figure out where the campfire came from.

The kid is about six feet tall, a smidge shorter than the Jogger. He's also not as drunk as he seemed earlier. Perhaps the alcohol is wearing off. The broken bottle is still in his hand, but it's not held up in either a threatening or defensive way. It just dangles there in his fingers. His breath is deep and steady. He's not out of breath, even after sprinting.

"Is this yours?" the kid-man asks.

Thankfully, the kid leaves the flashlight pointed downward and isn't trying to blind the Jogger again. Something thoughtful has entered his voice, which still has some years of deepening before he'll sound as old as the man they just left on the beach. Now the Jogger sees the kid-man is wearing brown canvas pants—waterproof, like someone used to being out in nature. He's wearing hiking boots, as brown as his pants.

"You've been waiting for a while," the kid-man says before the Jogger answers his first question.

"You have no idea," the Jogger says.

"How did you find this place? How did you find me?" The kid-man moves the thin beam of light around the small clearing. The Jogger sees the dead boy peeking out of the leaf pile, but the kid-man doesn't linger. Passes right over the body.

"It's hard to explain," the Jogger says.

"Try."

"The smell."

"Smell?"

"The smell of death."

The kid-man laughs. Repeats him: “The smell of death?”

The Jogger shrugs. “Yeah.”

“I’ve come up here for months. Haven’t seen another soul. Created my own private hideaway and some,” the kid-man waves his flashlight over the Jogger, takes in his attire, the sleek running shoes, “some *jogger* follows his nose and winds up here?”

The kid-man laughs, but there’s no humor in it.

A deep, sinking feeling roils in the Jogger’s stomach. “*You’ve* been coming up here for months?”

Immediately, the flashlight beam is straight into his eyes again. The world shrinks to that one pinprick of light. “Isn’t it perfect?” the kid-man asks. “Isolated. Beautiful. No one coming over uninvited. Free to love whoever you want, however you want. And you, jogger. You found my lovers.” The flashlight jumps away from the Jogger’s eyes. A halo appears over the boy in the leaves. Then the light moves again, to the spot beneath the tree where the Jogger found the femur.

“But, these, these...” the Jogger gestures at the clearing. “Are boys. Young. He—” The Jogger looks away, down the stretch of beach to the unconscious man who he cannot see.

“Is a man. Like you.”

The Jogger barely has time to jump backward as the kid-man darts toward him. Without thinking, the Jogger swings his arm wildly, catching the jagged side of the broken tequila bottle the kid stabs at him. The impact is heavy and clumsy. He feels his skin rip against the sharp glass, but it’s enough to make the kid-man drop the bottle. It sails off into the darkness.

The Jogger launches himself at the flashlight and the kid-man holding it. He lands directly on him and both tumble to the ground: the tequila cloud is strong. They crash to the clearing floor, which is partly covered in thin, soggy grass and leaves waiting to rot. The kid-man is on top of him, laughing a tequila-stained laugh. He’s enjoying himself. Of course he is. He lives for moments like this.

They spin closer to the edge of the lake. They roll into the water. The Jogger’s entire upper torso is submerged, his legs sprawled on the sandy shore—half in and half out of the lake. Icy. The autumn sun had done nothing to warm it during the day. The Jogger gasps and takes in a mouthful of water. He releases his grip on the kid-man at the shock. His opponent seizes both the moment and the Jogger’s collar. Holds him under the icy water.

For many years, the Jogger has faced death, seen the aftermath of it. In the black, freezing water he feels closer to death than he's ever been. And he, again, refuses to let death win.

The kid-man stands to gain more leverage, and the Jogger rolls his body weight toward the kid-man. Since he is low, gravity works in his favor. It's enough to unbalance the kid-man. The pressure on the back of his collar releases. As the kid-man falls over, he yanks the Jogger out of the water, ripping his jacket.

Water pours out of the Jogger as he coughs. Finally, air, sharp and fresh, reaches his lungs. Then the kid-man, using his own move, rolls into him and, again, they both fall to the ground. This time away from the water.

The Jogger feels something hot against his shoulder. The campfire. The embers are still there, still hot, glowing red. They just need fuel.

He grabs the front of the kid-man's shirt, pulls him low, as if to kiss him, and then jerks the kid-man to the side.

The Jogger sees the kid-man's face now—a growth of blond mustache, scruffy long hair, and a sunburned nose—right before he pushes that face into the coals. The kid-man screams. Tries to lift his head. But the Jogger holds him down. The Jogger's wet skin buys him a moment of respite from the heat but not for long. He feels his fingers burning, but he doesn't let up.

The killer's death takes a long, painful time.

Eventually, the squirming stops. Small flames lick around the kid-man's scruffy hair. The Jogger removes his hands from the back of the kid-man's neck. The tips of his fingers are charred. He smells burnt hair and crisp skin.

The Jogger steps away carefully. He turns and soaks his cut, burnt hands in the lake. The water that tried to kill him just a few minutes ago relieves the pain. He stays there, on shore, his hands below the surface, for the rest of the night.



In the gray light before dawn, as the stars fade from the canvas of the sky, he hears a deep groan.

The Jogger looks up.

Farther down the shoreline, walking slowly and carefully in the pre-dawn glow, is the bearded man. His baseball cap is gone. The man the Jogger mistook for the killer.

It's your turn.

The words hang in the air.

“What is that smell?” the man asks. He’s talking to himself. He doesn’t see the Jogger. Doesn’t see the kid-man face-down in a dead fire. Doesn’t see the dead boy in the leaves or the femur under the roots. But he will.

The Jogger breathes deep—and smells early morning air, freshwater, burnt hair, pine trees. The smell of death is gone.

He watches the man bend at the knees and vomit into the shallow surf—a combination of the hangover and the smell, the Jogger is sure. The man still doesn’t see him.

Watching the man’s suffering, the Jogger knows he should feel guilty.

Quietly, stepping over thick leaves, the Jogger steps back into the trees and creeps backward. When he no longer sees the man or the dead, he turns. And he jogs away.