

Winsome Mshindi

by Joseph M. Owens

The cold and the ice've really stoked a fire in those old bones of his. He runs with the gait of a racer, front legs straight out—each extension producing a crack like Jack London spitting into the cold—rear legs tucked with nails clawing into the earth to propel him forward. He looks magnificent. Stride—*crack*—stride—*crack*... Who knows how long his old shoulder will hold out. But for now, it's holding out long enough.

Winter is nearly here and we both know it, Winsome Mshindi and I. His name beholden to a double entendre of irony. A greyhound that never raced; his shoulder injured in training when he was a pup which makes Win-some more like Win-none, or Never-did. Winsome is not really at all what you'd call winsome, by which I mean, *handsome*—but he *is* endearing as all get out. His ears and feet are too big, twin radar dishes atop his head, his tail is too long and bushy. But he's got eyes that suggests an orneriness not found in older dogs and Mish, a name he's grown into—Mish is thirteen.

Stride—*crack*—stride—*crack*... slushy grass and mud fly from his feet, his legs still in possession of a fair amount of power that, even with a bum shoulder and old age working against him, makes Mish faster than most other dogs, young *or* old, in an all out sprint. But Mish can't help his instincts. After all, greyhounds are bred to hunt rabbits. He rounds the corner of the yard, taking a path around a burning bush in the corner, sees *something*, and tries to make a cut like a halfback spotting a hole to open field. Mish—bless his 91 dog-year old heart, makes the cut on that bum shoulder and chestplants into the ground at roughly 25 miles per hour.

Tough as hell, even in excruciating situations, he only yelps when he first hits the ground, probably out of surprise. When he slides to a stop after skittering across the frosty grass, he's panting, hard.

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He looks up at me with a look like *Whoa... Didja see that?* I did see it and the thud he made hitting the ground made my stomach lurch.

Mish isn't getting up. It's like he's telling me he just needs a minute to collect himself—he's really just tough as hell. When I get near him, he pops his head up and kind of hoots a little, a sound like an owl makes, refusing in his toughness to whimper or whine. However, the hooting sound, I know, he only makes when he's really hurting.

I feel pretty terrible because I know how he gets jazzed up like this when it's just me and him, especially with a chill in the air. Like he's showing me that he *can still do it*, that he can still pull his weight alongside his four brothers, and that he's not so worthless as to require going back to the metal box at the humane society where his previous owner'd left him three winters ago, left him when he was 10 years old and 10 pounds underweight. When I took him in, I made him a promise that only one of us could understand, but I'd promised, in a verbal contract I intended to uphold, that he'd never go back to a metal box again.

The hooting is getting more and more intense and I think he's telling me we might be at an impasse out here in the cold and the sleet. Because, as I can clearly see, he isn't getting up on his own. The sleet starts coming down harder and it makes everything that's going on feel *that much worse*. I realize I have to carry him inside.

When I scoop him up—one arm under his chest, the other under his belly—my right arm immediately goes hot and I can feel that my sleeve is soaked clear through to the skin. He finally concedes to the pain and whimpers a little, the look he gives me is almost apologetic. I tell him don't even think twice about it; kids an old people pee all the time and he's like a crazy, old mixture of both.

I'm joking aloud with myself because it's the only thing that stops up my tears.

The sleet comes down harder and harder but I think Mish needs a trip to the vet. I resolve then and there to carry him everywhere he needs to go for the rest of his life if I have to because he's owed that at least. You get owed certain things when you are dropped off in a cold metal box in January, neglected and underweight. The universe owes you comfort and love and a warm place to sleep in your twilight years.

It's the first sleet of the year so it isn't sticking to the pavement very well. I decide I'm going to wait it out and then drive Mish to the vet, so I carry the old man back to my bedroom and lay him on my own bed, mostly because it'll be easier than picking him up all the way off the floor later. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, Mish hates being put on the bed but tonight he's completely quiet about it. He even wags his bushy tail a couple times, confirming his approval.

The news says the sleet should let up within the hour which is literal good news. Mish and I are going to wait it out on the king size bed like it's a slumber party for two and watch TV until then. I realize I don't care what it'll cost to fix him up or how much pain meds will cost for him because I feel compelled to honor my promise to him, a promise I intend to keep.

