A Runner


Free to run where I please. So much better than waiting for someone else to turn up. Measuring your pace to theirs. That’s not for me. I run alone. Under the streetlamps stuck with moths. Down the slug-path. Past the semi with the pink caravan covered with flower transfers. Over the bridge looking down on the bypass. Past the cemetery where yew berries pop on the pavement.

See ahead of me. Another runner. Maybe two hundred metres distant. Imagine catching up with them. Imagine trying to talk to them. What would I even say? In between breaths.

“What is your name?”

“Really? Many people are called that. What is your surname?”

“Do you have a partner?”

“Why not?”

“Are your family still alive?”

“Do they live locally?”

“Why are they so far away?”

“Will you go on holiday again?”

I could answer all these questions. But why would I ask them?

Anyway I am not gaining on my companion. Neither am I falling behind. I must keep running.

We are going into a tunnel. They are going into a tunnel. It will be thirty seconds or so before I get to the tunnel.

The lights are bright. Perhaps I will see them more fully. Make out a detail.

I have never been in this tunnel. Now I am here it is very bright. I am breathing exhaust fumes trapped by the curving walls. Slipstreams buffet me. I have to concentrate not to fall into the paths of lorries. So I cannot really focus on my quarry. And now they are through the tunnel and passing into darkness again.
My eyes adjust but not before I stumble and nearly crash into the ground. I steady myself. I look along the cutting. There is movement ahead. I am following.

It’s strange how companionship builds up so quickly. Particularly with people you’ve never spoken to. Now I feel as if I am following someone I know. And without having to ask them about their life history. There they are. Simply. Presented at a distance. We’ve come to an accommodation I think. We are there for each other. Without having to be there.

My eyes have adjusted now. It is easier to see. But still not very easy.

We are running down an avenue lined with trees. They are old. Established. They drop little pompons along with their leaves. Plane. Plane trees.

When I glance up from the debris I think I catch a detail in my companion ... Perhaps they are female. Just from the shape and gait. But then straining to see, it all changes and I’m convinced it’s a man. Or a woman. No I can’t really tell anything. I am not gaining. I am not failing.

How long will we run for I wonder? Already I have spent longer running than I would normally. My usual circuit would have brought me home twenty-three minutes ago. I do not mind. I am fit and healthy and my breathing is steady. But my feet are rubbing in my trainers.

There are special plasters in the bathroom cabinet when I get home. Ones that look like skin.

The figure paces on ahead of me. It is steady. Unwavering. It seems impervious to the rain that is beginning to dampen my cheeks.

“What is your name?” I wonder. I try to engage them in conversation. Even though I cannot talk to them.

They are crossing at a junction ahead of me. They disappear beneath the wheels of a huge articulated truck.

Is there a name they might have? One that is dear to me? A surname? Do I know any surnames except my own? Of course I do ... What a ridiculous thought! I went to school.

I am at the junction now. I check and cross.

What would a good name be for my companion? What would I ...?
Light. The alarm of brakes screeching. Someone is yelling. Someone is screaming. But mostly there is light all through me. Spinning me around. Nothing but tunnels of light burning me away.

I’m lying on the tarmac. I open my eyes. I look into the grille of an engine. It shudders like a great animal. I try to placate it as I stand. I am walking to the kerb. I stand on the pavement and breathe. I am breathing. The shouting subsides, I am not looking.

I need to be more careful. I thought I was. But I wasn’t. This is the proof that I wasn’t.

I rest on a street name. I have lost my companion. They have gone on ahead. Without a backward glance.

I must get home. But there is only one way to get home. I must run. I put one foot in front of the other and start. Slowly. Cautiously. Warming up. Building to speed. I am running. Again. Alone. Again.

But I can feel something. Or hear something. I can’t tell which. A rhythm. Where’s it coming from? I look around. And there. Behind me. Is a figure running. Two hundred metres back. It is running behind me. I strain to see it, but in the lamplight it is only a regular beating of shadow. A ripple in the darkness spreading. Its limbs tick in time together. Like a metronome. All it is is its running.

It is coming. It is my companion. Its head is bobbing.

I turn. I need to run. I am running. I am running.

My feet are blistered. They slap the pavement like steaks on a slab. It hurts. It is coming. I must keep running. There is blood swilling in my trainers.

I am alone. In the dark. Running.