

Freedom In The Silence

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I still remember the freedom in the silence. The way the wind rushed over us, we were one entity as we sped through the snow covered trees; streamline across a vast frozen lake and gracefully flying around corners as fast as lightning. You never actually see the wind, only what it moves or flows against. It's the first time I ever heard silence make a sound, and that sound had me deliriously hooked in an instant. The sky was bluebird bright, the kind of morning where the snow twinkles. The sunlight bounced through the crystals forming on the sleepy branches of evergreens, the paws of the eight dogs racing along kicking up glitter. I inhaled calmly, deeply; it didn't matter to me that it was minus twenty-eight degrees; that breath of crisp Canadian air was more fresh and filled with clarity than any I had known before. This was my next calling; this was something I had to know how to do, running with the team until we became one.

Canada was a curiosity to me. It was as vastly different as a girl from a small village in South-east England could get, it was a stark contrast from the environment with which I grew up. People, places and animals to begin with; weather, food and aurora filled skies to continue, and, lifestyle as a whole to fathom.

I had travelled a fair bit by the time I was twenty-eight years old, but with Canada, specifically the Ottawa Valley in Ontario, I had no idea what to imagine and where to even begin. The entire province is 1.076 million km squared, comparatively, England is 130,395 km squared. My knowledge about Canada, up until the point of planning my trip, was that it was big, cold, full of moose and that if you were lucky, you'd see the Aurora Borealis. The latter is what drew me there.

I planned a trip with a friend of mine that would have us arriving into Ottawa and making our way north, the towns grew smaller and smaller until we reached Calvin, a stones throw from the small, sleepy, historic town of Mattawa. The natural phenomenon known to many as 'Lady Aurora' had drawn us north; we were spoilt by her presence every night of our stay, for hours on end. She danced and weaved her way across the clear dark sky, ever twisting, ever changing; truthfully I wondered how I would ever appreciate stars again without witnessing the beauty of the aurora borealis whenever I looked skyward.

An activity we were hoping to partake in was dogsledding and we phoned a number of tour companies in and around Algonquin Provincial Park comparing days, times and prices. In the end we were chose Amable Du Fond River Mushing, a family owned and run company. The sled ride would bring us from their home, where the dogs live comfortably in the yard, out through the trees and down onto a vast and beautiful frozen lake. Rosanne, the owner, greeted us wonderfully, introducing us to the dogs and answering my plethora of questions and inquiries enthusiastically. We had put on all the layers we owned and still she layered us up further in animal fur jackets, thick winter boots and beaver mittens. She chortled, explaining heartily,

"Trust me-- you'll need these out there."

We met the strong four-legged team, they were happy, healthy, playing and ready to be fed breakfast, which was our job – Rosanne explained; it would give the dogs a moment to know

we were here to appreciate them, here to work with them, here, simply, for them. Stomachs warm and content, we watched as they got hooked up to the line, yelling and barking with anticipation, ready to run. We were told one of us could sit in the sled bag, and one of us could stand. I jumped at the chance to join Rosanne on the back runners. Once we were loaded and ready to go she released the snow hook, the dogs immediately ceased their excited barking, tugged in one fluid motion and we took off up a small slope, immediately curving into an s-bend and raced down the trail. Snow was piled high by this time in February and the dogs tracked their way, branches brushing them and sprinkling snow through the air as we dashed along. Through a bracket of trees, the sunlight twinkled revealing an expansive frozen lake; then it was just us and the wild, stretching endlessly out ahead of us.

It feels like flying. The weather plays a huge role in dog sledding, but somehow even on the windiest of days, the sheer determination written on the dogs faces, and stoically obvious in their demeanour is so inspiring. You get these crystal clear minus twenty-eight winter wonderland moments, where the silence is absolute, interrupted only by the swish of the runners across the dusted slick ice and the gentle thud of paws on powder. I hope that sound rings in my ears for eternity.

As we raced into a steady speed the dogs listened attentively and eagerly to Rosanne's calls, "Gee" to turn right, "Haw" to turn left. Occasionally we would stop, allowing the dogs to take a break. Despite the air temperature, these athletes were running so fast they needed a moment to grab some snow to hydrate, or simply roll around in the fresh powder to cool off. I had never seen anything like it and I continued to pepper Rosanne with questions. When did she get her first dogs? How many did she own? Were there puppies? How did she learn to sled? Could I do it? She encouraged me from the start, and in the months that followed, became somewhat of a distant mentor to me -- recognising the sparkle in my eye that I've now identified time and time again amongst mushers with a pure love for the sport.

These dogs themselves were a carefully chosen elite breed of Alaskan Husky. They live together, play together, work together and blend together. It was obvious to me they were well loved and content, and that they would have kept going for hours out of sheer delight if we had let them. Unfortunately, a two hour trip was what we had paid for, but fortunately for me, those two hours were the beginning of a love affair that is four years in and ever growing.

When you find something you love, that calls to you, beckons you, fills your soul and your spirit – it is masterful. When you can share that something you love with eight other souls who live, breath and are filled with bliss to be a part of your team, it's almost indescribable. You have every opportunity to embrace change in your life, and when you become the catalyst for that change, you hold the part of your soul that others so dearly seek for themselves.

Dogs have a way of looking straight into your heart, and they give nothing but truth when you look straight back into their eyes. What greater way to live, than to live with your soul entwined so drastically that you feel every spirit of emotion held by the team you created. They look to you for guidance, yet they guide you. They look to you for encouragement, yet their confidence leads you on, they look to you for love, yet it is their love that thrives and builds within you and they look to you for comfort, yet it is their devotion which pushes you through. My journey began in the Ottawa Valley, and it continues to wind its way across the beautiful land of Alaska and the Great North, tearing through the mighty Rocky Mountains,

edging along the Hudson Bay and pounding across the Eastern Forests, but I will never forget the freedom in the silence, and I will carry it with me wherever I go.