

ROAM

ROAM

A Novel



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For Gustavo and Mia Bella

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List of Songs

1. “The Smell of Grass”	15
2. “The Great Love”	60
3. “Journeys with Thatcher”	102
4. “Nelson and Lucy”	134
5. “The Wolf Mother and the Three-legged Dog”	203
6. “Home”	249
7. “The Immense Magical Powers of Dogs”	302

ROAM

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Part One



The Great Love

1

The first thing Nelson smelled was grass. Rich, beautiful, mysterious grass. It wafted in from the pastures outside Mrs. Anderson's farmhouse, where Nelson and his brothers and sisters lay wriggling, close to their mother. His small nose wrinkled, perplexed by this powerful new stimulus. When he was in his mother's womb, he had whiffed it in the distance as his nose's power expanded exponentially. But when the full power of grass hit him out in the world, it was scary, intoxicating, and deeply mysterious.

The smell had many layers to it. As the years went by, Nelson would learn to discern the meaning of those multiple deep scents. They held information about the day—which creatures had walked nearby and left their mark, how much dew there had been that morning, and hints of the distant meadows where that dew had come from. They held information about the rain two days earlier and about the ants and other bugs that lived in the grass. But also, deep from within the soil in which it grew,

the grass held sometimes murky hints about summers past, and winters from long ago, about the creatures that had lived and died in the New Hampshire county where Nelson was born. It held the history of all the roots and bones that had lain in that rich soil for centuries.

Nelson was one of a litter of six mutts. In fact, he was not meant to be a mutt. Mrs. Anderson had bred pedigree beagles and poodles for many years. Her puppies sold for thousands of dollars each and were shipped to locations all across America. Nelson's mother, Lola, a gentle apricot miniature poodle, had given birth to several litters of puppies before. Nelson's father, King, a beagle much photographed as a perfect specimen at the annual county fair, was not meant to gain access to Lola's compound when she was in heat two months earlier. He had successfully impregnated Nougat, another beagle, several times, and Mrs. Anderson adored him. But she had planned for Lola to breed with her normal mate, Kennedy, a dark brown poodle with a warm heart. She had no idea that King had been bewitched by Lola's rich bouquet as it wafted from her kennel the previous spring. Noticing the beginnings of a small hole under the wooden fence surrounding Lola's kennel, King dug furiously when Mrs. Anderson was not around, and lovemaking with Lola followed. Mrs. Anderson suspected nothing until Lola's pups came out one day looking unlike anything she had seen. She had a moment of anger when she realized what King had done. She also had a moment of regret when she realized that the thousands of dollars she knew she would make from a pedigree poodle litter was not to be. But when she held Nelson's older sister in the palm of her hand and felt the little dog's heart beating, her own heart swiftly melted, and she knew she would

raise these puppies for the first two months of their lives with all the love she normally gave to her pedigree pups.

Mrs. Anderson was accustomed to seeing two or three pups in a poodle litter. Lola gave birth to six this time. Perhaps it was King's unrelenting lovemaking to Lola that had caused this anomaly. The fragrance of Lola in heat was so utterly compelling that each time he thought their lovemaking was coming to an end King somehow felt another burst of energy inside his beagle heart.

The six puppies that emerged from her small frame surprised Lola. She was sad when number four lay there, unmoving, after he emerged. After she ate the small bag of afterbirth that had protected him in the womb, she licked him again and again, trying to bring him back to life. Mrs. Anderson watched, praying for some movement, but after half an hour, and not a sign of life, she gently pulled the small pup away from Lola and wrapped him in a white towel. Later that night she would burn his remains and scatter them in the pastures outside her farmhouse. She would look up at the crescent moon and pray for the little dog that had never known the world beyond his mother's womb.

Lola felt an intangible sadness come over her as she saw her pup disappear from sight. But she could not be sad for long. The convulsions in her stomach started again, and soon enough, another beautiful puppy emerged into the world. Nelson was largely light brown, or apricot, with splashes of white, particularly over his face. A dark brown circle surrounded the one eye, and a white circle surrounded the other. From an early age this gave all the impression that he was "wide-eyed" and fascinated by the world. But at the time of his birth, his eyes were firmly closed, as they would be for the first week of his life.

His nose twitched excitedly as the smell of grass filled his world

for the first time. He felt his mother lick him, and her scent, too, filled his senses, rich and comforting. Mrs. Anderson entered the room again, noticed the new puppy and patted him ever so gently on his small head. And so, he whiffed a human being for the first time, and that smell, although complex, was also warm and good.

This was a lot to happen to such a young soul in the first minutes of his life, and Nelson was suddenly struck by an overwhelming hunger. His mother saw the quivers in his small body, and those of her other pups. She pushed and pushed and her final puppy, Nelson's little sister, emerged into the world, wriggling and sniffing. Gently, Mrs. Anderson placed each of the puppies near Lola's six nipples, and they wriggled inward toward their first meal.

The first week of Nelson's life passed in a blur. As the days went by, his nose explored with greater and greater skill the scents around him. Then hunger would strike again. Sometimes Lola would be sleeping when he crawled toward her, desperate for sustenance. He did not know of course how exhausted she was from feeding her five surviving puppies. Secretly, Mrs. Anderson was very concerned. Lola was a small dog by any standards. Once, many years before, another poodle owned by Mrs. Anderson, Lola's grandmother, had developed a severe calcium deficiency from feeding a large litter, and had died on the way to the emergency veterinary clinic in the small town of Nelson, New Hampshire, nearby. Mrs. Anderson had fed the remaining pups, including Lola's gorgeous mother, a pearly white poodle, with a bottle every four hours.

Often Nelson would wake up to Lola licking his stomach. He loved this, and he liked the smell of the warm liquid that

seemed to flow from his own body after she did this. Its smell would never last for too long. He would whiff Mrs. Anderson close by and feel her hands on his body, and then most of the smell of his excrement would be gone. Nelson soon noticed that all of his brothers and sisters had a similar liquid that would come out of their bodies. While it smelled very similar to his own, his little nose soon identified very specific scents in theirs that allowed him to identify them. Sometimes, when he suckled on his mother's nipples, he would notice a very similar but much more intense odor coming from her. It was pungent and strong and earthy. Sometimes Mrs. Anderson would take Lola outside for an hour or two, and Nelson would quietly cry until this reassuring smell was close by again.

Smell would always be the great and overwhelming presence that defined Nelson's perception of the world. But about a week after he was born, his little eyes drifted slowly open, and the comforting gray blur of Mrs. Anderson's face looked down on him. Nelson was the first of the litter to look into the world, and with the special coloring he had around his eyes, Mrs. Anderson could only smile when she saw the wide-eyed puppy looking up at her. Her own eyes were slowly losing their ability to see, and the strong glasses the eye doctor had prescribed for her the summer before were probably going to need to be replaced soon. Many pups had passed through this small room at the back of her farmhouse where she looked after Lola's and Nougat's litters for many years after her own son had left to live in Oregon. Most puppies were cute and cuddly, and she adored them all. But there was something quite special about the way Nelson looked up at her that morning. Mrs Anderson knew the eyesight of dogs was limited compared to that of humans. They did see

more than just black and white, but they were color-blind when it came to reds and greens. She knew that dogs lacked the depth of field of human vision, although movement of any sort excited them. But Mrs. Anderson could swear she saw a special curiosity and openness to the world in Nelson's wide eyes that morning. Many years later she still thought about him.

Soon, all of Lola's five children had opened their eyes. She braced herself for what she sensed was to come. Their little legs would grow stronger, and they would develop rapidly, all the while hungering for more and more of her milk. Whereas at birth there was little hair on their soft bodies, it was just a few weeks before light and semicurl fur would clothe them. Lola had memories of the long sleep she had had in the months after her previous litters had left her, but she also remembered the sadness of those days.

By the time Nelson and his brothers and sisters were one month old, they were a rambunctious bunch. His family fascinated Nelson. They were all playful to an extreme, obsessed with tripping each other and tugging at each other's now-full fur. But some of his siblings were quieter than the others, happy sometimes to just lie with their mother or each other, quietly wriggling while their scents intertwined. Others never gave up their pursuit of proving they were the most agile, the fastest, the ones who kept control of the ball of red wool Mrs. Anderson had thrown into the small pen they shared with their mother.

Nelson's curiosity soon emerged as the trait that defined him. Mrs. Anderson noticed him constantly trying to find a way out of their small pen, and indeed one day he did. She entered the room, almost stepping on the tiny pup that was waiting by the

door, smelling the new odors that glided in through the small gap between the door and the floor. Chiding him quietly, she picked him up and put him back with his family. It was just moments, though, before the wide-eyed puppy returned to the small opening he had found at the back of the pen and found his way out once again. She blocked it up with a pair of old socks. More and more, the smells that entered the room fed little Nelson's curiosity. He whiffed sweet and meaty odors coming from a clanky place elsewhere in the house, aromas that made him so hungry even his mother's milk did not entirely satisfy him.

Mrs. Anderson took to picking up Nelson every night and holding him in her large worn hands, stroking him quietly while she listened to music. Nelson loved this, and would drift off to sleep in a state of bliss. He would awake and lick her fingers in the same loving way his mother would lick his stomach, and she seemed to like this. He was not aware that he was the only puppy for which she reserved this special honor. Sometimes Mrs. Anderson held Nelson close to her face. By then his eyes were seeing a great degree of detail, and he observed her blue eyes looking directly at him. Sometimes he would lick her face, and a few times he tasted the salt of little tears. Later in his life he would come to understand the fuller meaning of this salty liquid that human beings sometimes emitted, but for now he just enjoyed its taste.

One morning, when Nelson was five weeks old, Mrs. Anderson put him and his siblings into a small box. Lola watched earnestly, but she did not stop Mrs. Anderson, with whom she had a deep bond of trust. Mrs. Anderson opened the door to

their small pen and walked out of the room, carrying the box of pups. Lola walked closed behind her.

Mrs. Anderson's house was a little dark, but that of course did not limit the symphony of smells that Nelson inhaled as they passed through to the garden. There were the remnants of those kitchen smells, which he sometimes whiffed in the pen. There was the smell of meat, and fried eggs, and melted butter. There was the round, smooth aroma of pancakes cooked a couple of days before, which lingered in the corners of Mrs. Anderson's living room. As they walked past the kitchen itself, the scent of green apples entered Nelson's nose for the first time, and it was scintillating in a very different sort of way.

As they exited into Mrs. Anderson's garden, Nelson's head almost exploded from what entered his nose. First there was grass, endless amounts of it, and smelling it close up was profoundly more intense than its more distant scent. Mrs. Anderson placed each of the pups down on her front lawn and let them wander. Nelson's small, wet nose touched grass for the first time, and it was like an electric current ran through his body. The puppies scattered over the lawn, as each was drawn by multiple separate strands and substrands of odor. Occasionally, if one pup got too close to the fence that separated the garden from the pasture where horses and cows milled around, Mrs. Anderson would pick it up and return it to a position closer to her house. Lola, too, kept a watchful eye on her children, barking loudly if they went too far. The five fluffy puppies were scarcely aware of their two mothers, though. They burrowed their noses as deep as they could into the soil, lost in something close to ecstasy.

Finally when Nelson looked up, he saw the beds of flowers flanking the garden. He gingerly approached them, unsure

of what they were. But when their scents drifted down toward him, he knew that these strange objects could not be harmful to him. There were red roses and yellow roses, agapanthus and daffodils, lilies and African violets. As he sniffed them, he slowed down, entranced, closed his eyes, and let the sun shine down on him. Many years later when Nelson found himself in broken city streets surrounded by concrete, he would still distantly remember this garden, and his first encounter with flowers, and it would revive him almost magically, at least for a short time.

Mrs. Anderson disappeared for a few minutes, and when she returned, another dog, about the same size as Lola, was with her. Nelson did not know he was meeting his father, King, the beagle, a dog with an emphatic gait. Nelson sensed the strength and nobility of the larger dog. Lola stayed close to her babies when King arrived, eying him and growling. King himself did not seem terribly interested in Nelson or his siblings that morning, sniffing them briefly, then running off barking at a nearby squirrel. Neither parent seemed to have any recollection of their passionate lovemaking just a few months before. Mrs. Anderson sighed as King ignored his puppies, but she also knew inside that she should have known better than to hope he would take to them.

This was also the day that Mrs. Anderson first fed the pups something other than their mother's milk. Mrs. Anderson was keeping a close eye on Lola, and her exhaustion from the constant feeding of her pups was easily visible. She had previously preferred to wait until six weeks before giving puppies solid food, but she decided to try giving them some bread and cow's milk for the first time, so that hopefully Lola would get a chance to rest a little.

Nelson and his siblings did not know what to do with the

small bowls of warm milk and old bread broken in pieces that she put down in front of them. Nelson jumped right into the middle of one bowl with a big splash. It felt good. Mrs. Anderson fished him out and cleaned him, and then holding him in her hands tried to teach him how to lick the milk from the bowl. In the days to come, Mrs. Anderson would cut up small pieces of apples and carrots, and she chopped up a boiled egg into pieces one day for the puppy's enjoyment.

Late one night Nelson was awakened by a new sound. It was Mrs. Anderson's voice. But whereas he was accustomed to it being calm and serene, this time it was high pitched and loud even though it was elsewhere in the house, and somehow it scared the dog. He did not understand what was causing her to behave like this, and when she entered the room half an hour later, he could smell something new on her, the sediment of intense anger that had just passed. This was the first time in his short life he had encountered the smell of anger, and he did not like it at all. He never would like it. It was not something he ever smelled on dogs, and he learned it was one of the things that distinguished dogs from human beings. Nelson himself would experience many, many emotions in his lifetime, but anger was never one of them.

Mrs. Anderson looked down at Nelson, noticed him watching her, and picked him up. She stroked him on his little head. When she put him close to her face, he quickly licked at her tears, and she smiled limply. Nelson enjoyed the saltiness of her tears, but this time he was also happy that the scent of her happiness was returning. She put him down and exited from the room,

but was back just a moment later with a small plate. When she picked up Nelson and put him on her lap again he quickly recognized that the food on the plate emitted the same meaty scent he had smelled several times during the past weeks. It was probably the most wonderful smell he'd ever encountered. The young dog gulped down the small pieces of sausage she had brought for him and she giggled as he licked the plate, yearning for more.

Lola awoke from the smell of the sausage and lazily opened her eyes. It was one of her favorite dishes, and normally she would have politely barked to remind Mrs. Anderson to give her some. But this time she just went back to sleep. She knew that some time soon her puppies would no longer surround her, and once again it would be her, Mrs. Anderson, King, Kennedy, and Nougat that would walk the woods together. She knew she would return to sleeping at the foot of Mrs. Anderson's bed at night, and the memories of her puppies would soon fade. So, that night, she let little Nelson eat all of the treat.

Mrs. Anderson was in fact considering keeping little Nelson. It was always difficult letting the puppies go, but she had to remind herself that she needed the supplemental income from the litter, and this time it would be much less than usual. Luckily, some of the pet shops around the country where her pedigree pups were normally sold had reluctantly agreed to take her beagle-poodle mixes. The pet shop owners knew that the pups she normally provided were not only beautiful examples of the breed, but displayed the sort of temperaments that dog owners loved. They were playful but obedient, cheeky but loving. One joked he would call Lola and King's offspring either "beadles" or "poogles." Of course, she would receive only a fraction of the payment she normally received for her pups. To sell Nelson

for only 150 dollars seemed silly; it was so little in the grander scheme of things. But she had a gate that needed fixing, and she needed to buy some more hens, and her pension hardly covered the bills.

Mrs. Anderson regularly cleaned the puppies with a damp towel. This had become a twice-daily occurrence with their poop becoming thicker with each solid meal they ate. One morning, however, Nelson sensed they were in for something new when she carried them all through to the laundry room at the back of her house. The smell there was comforting and dry, and it reminded Nelson of lying in Mrs. Anderson's bed with her that one night.

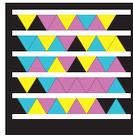
She left the puppies writhing together in the small crate, and prepared a small tub of gentle, warm soapy water. One by one, she bathed them. Nelson instantly loved the sensation. Mrs. Anderson gently rubbed his entire body, which was like being licked all over by his mother. Soon, he felt fresh and alive and the lavender smell of the soap lulled him into a contented bliss. When she had thoroughly cleaned the pup, she rinsed him in another small tub. Then using a thick towel, she rubbed him dry. Holding his head carefully between her hands, she used small but sharp scissors to trim his fluffy hair. Nelson writhed a little, and Mrs. Anderson narrowly averted poking him in the eye once as she trimmed the little hairs around his eyes. At the end of it all she lifted him up close and kissed him several times. Nelson licked her face and tasted salty water around her eyes.

That night, Mrs. Anderson would bring in a wide selection of the pups' favorite foods. There was milk and bread, but also

little pieces of cheese, eggs, apples, and sausage. One by one, she fed Lola's litter of puppies. Exhausted, Lola ate a few morsels herself.

As Nelson snuggled up next to his mother to sleep, he could smell his brothers and sisters all around him, clean as a whistle. He could hear their little bodies rising and falling with each breath, and the occasional tiny rumble of their full stomachs. The lights were off, but he could smell Mrs. Anderson sitting in her chair nearby. This was the best day of Nelson's life so far. The happiness he felt as he drifted off to sleep that night was soft and enveloping. He dreamed of fields of grass covered in sausages, where he played endlessly with his brothers and sisters.

But when Nelson woke up the next day, his life would become very different.



The Smell of Grass

What does it feel like to be a puppy mysteriously bewitched by "The Smell of Grass"? Scan here to listen.



