

BY JAY MALLONEE

UNCONQUERED

HOW ONE RESCUE DOG
EMBRACES LIFE DESPITE
ADVERSITY



Right

Highway, a Karelian bear dog, bonded quickly with his rescuer.

“I thank whatever gods may be . . .”

On Oct. 12, 2012, I was returning home from work with my black lab Shyla. As we entered the 70 mph curve just before turning off the main highway, I saw a medium-sized black and white dog emerge from the national forest where we live and attempt to cross the road. I quickly slowed, and as we passed by I could see he was old with matted hair. I pulled over and jumped out of the truck, knowing more traffic would arrive quickly. I yelled and waved for him to come over, and he walked the center line in my direction. I did not yet know he was deaf. I heard cars coming but the curve blocked my view. I scooped him up in my arms and headed to the truck as a vehicle whizzed by. At that point I realized he had lost an encounter with a skunk. I lowered the tailgate and lifted his fragrant body into the truck bed under the canopy. I drove the last few miles home thinking, “What just happened?”

The next morning we stopped by the vet clinic. He was chipped, and I called the owner within minutes. She explained that she had lived alone on the ranch just south of my cabin, but age forced her to move into town 40 miles away. She had already been there three months and claimed to have driven out to the ranch once or twice a week to feed him. He had wandered the national forest the entire time and was now just above starvation level weight. We met several days later and she officially gave me the dog. I also learned more



about his past, which matched what the vets had found.

“For my unconquerable soul.”

He was a Karelian bear dog, and they estimated his age at 12 years. He was dying from an oral infection so two weeks later the vets pulled six teeth. The others were either missing or broken. His left knee was damaged and had not healed properly, and he was deaf from a shotgun blast next to his head. He was put on a month of antibiotics to keep him alive, and over the next week he slept 18 - 20 hours each day. I kept looking to see if he was still breathing. He didn't urinate for three days, despite drinking water, so apparently his kidneys had been shutting down. The vets didn't know if he would live or not. After several weeks of uncertainty, his personality suddenly sprang to life. He pranced, twirled, play bowed and even sat on his abdomen and beat his arms on the floor when excited. He was hilarious. I named him Highway.

“I am the master of my fate.”

Since the beginning, Shyla and I have been Highway's source of reassurance, and a bond of trust quickly developed. At work he often peered around the corner to see where I was

then go back to his pad and sleep. During lunch we went for walks to build up his strength, and I saw then some of his limitations. He trotted stiffly because of his old and damaged knees, and ran by pushing off with both legs simultaneously. Yet he seemed to see more than his cataracts indicated, like when dogs walked by. He went from zero to bonkers when he saw them, a response that undoubtedly helped to fend off predators in the forest. I also found that if I clapped loudly enough within a few feet of him he could hear it. Now I use hand signals and clapping so we can wander the property at home without a leash.

By the end of the first year, he still had not gained much weight. I found out why on Nov. 4, 2013. He spewed blood and mucous everywhere while defecating. Then the vomiting began. Within 24 hours he had almost died from dehydration and was put on IVs for three straight days. Although the vets had prevented disaster, they weren't interested in finding the cause.

Highway continued to deteriorate over the next two months and stomach issues now contributed. As in human medicine, not all doctors are caring, and sometimes bravado is substituted for knowledge. Highway lost more and more weight, and I looked desperately for a vet who was compassionate and good at diagnostics. Then one day I found her. She

saved his life. With diligent care and persistence, we discovered that chronic inflammation throughout the GI tract was causing the stomach issues. Antibiotics and steroids help, and I cook every meal for him, which includes increased fiber content. For animals with such disparate needs, perseverance from everyone is required.

“I am the captain of my soul.”

Since Highway’s arrival, death has been a frequent visitor. It seems to negotiate with him the date of his final release. It’s patient, always knowing the inevitable outcome. He responds by fighting when he must, but continues to enjoy each day. He knows now a life of contentment, rather than pain and suffering.

When I first found him he ate wood, dirt, plants, feces—anything to stay alive. Another result from his abuse by neglect. A year later it apparently triggered an immune response in his GI tract, the source of chronic inflammation. It could be fatal someday but he has finally gained weight.

This past February his current vet reevaluated his age to be about 17 years, given his weakening hind-quarters and thickening cataracts. I have since upgraded his life journey from remarkable to astonishing. Now when he stares at me I look into his eyes and wonder, “Who are you? What planet are you from?”

I know the end will come soon, although he remains serene, joyful and play bows every day. We get back what we give: I provided the pathway, and Highway chose life. He has made it clear that until his body undergoes

complete and catastrophic failure, he will remain here with us. —

*Jay Mallonee has studied a variety of animals since 1977, from wolves to whales. His research on wolves began in 1992, and he has written extensively about them in his scientific publications, magazines, newspapers and on his website (www.wolfandwildlife-studies.com). Jay also wrote the book *Timber - A Perfect Life*, an account of his 16-year relationship with a profound canine companion.*

**The headers in the article above are lines from the poem *Invictus* – Latin for “unconquered.”*

