

Mousse

In December of 2009 the Cass County Sheriff's office raided a puppy mill somewhere near Walker. They found more than 200 dogs in an old house trailer. Puppies made up about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the animals housed there. No single local shelter had enough capacity to take all of the dogs, so they were distributed throughout the area. About thirty of the dogs and puppies made their way to the Park Rapids shelter.

I didn't know about the raid when I went to the Park Rapids shelter in early January. I was just looking for a puppy for the farm. We hadn't owned a dog since the loss of our sweet Molly some years earlier, and I missed the company. I had arrived at the shelter a few days after the Cass County diaspora, and the staff had not yet had time to sort through all of the puppies and ready them for adoption. The pups were all in the building, about ten to an enclosure.

When I asked if I could see the pups, members of the staff told me I was in luck. It was puppy play time, when the pups are set free in the hall so their enclosures could be cleaned and restocked with toys, food, and water. I was invited to join the madness in the hall and see which, if any, I thought would be a good fit. I was delighted to accept and was sitting on the floor cross-legged with my back against the wall when the gates opened. I was engulfed by a tsunami of puppies. Name a breed, and there was probably some representative of it in that pack of playful pups. They were wrestling, yapping, and playing tug of war with sock dolls. A few took a moment to sniff at me, but they all were drawn back into the pandemonium. All, that is, except one.

A tiny, eight-week-old pup, medium brown with white paws and a white chest, sporting a pair of grossly oversized ears, walked up to me. She didn't want to share in the riot so she climbed into my lap and fell asleep. My dog had found me. I was delighted.

When I showed her to the shelter manager and announced my intent to adopt that one pup, her reaction was not what I had expected. That pup had birth defects in all four of her legs. She was obviously lethargic, something that might indicate internal issues. No, that pup couldn't be adopted. It would have to be "put down" because it was clear she could never have a "quality life."

I tried to argue my point, that this pup was the one I wanted. It was Sunday afternoon, and the shelter was closed on Mondays, so I was told to come back Tuesday and see if the pup was still available after a "health and fitness" exam. I was horribly disappointed. How, I wondered, could such a momentous decision be made after a

cursory exam? I left, but all the way back to the farm I was building arguments designed to save that pup. By the time I went to bed, I knew what I would do. I would go back and demand that specific pup, defects be damned.

Early Monday morning I was sucking on a cup of coffee when I realized that the shelter manager might choose that day of being closed to the public to end the life of my little misfit. I jumped in the truck and pulled up at the shelter door just as the manager was coming out, puppy in hand and headed for the vet. I immediately became guilty of dognapping. I snatched the pup, jumped into my truck and drove back to the farm.

Apparently Minnesota law says that animal shelters do not actually own the creatures that come their way and so “stealing” the pup was not much of a legal issue. Tuesday morning I was called by the shelter and asked to drop by and fill out the paperwork that goes along with adopting a shelter pet. I didn’t have to comply, but I did. While I was there, I also picked up the pup’s sister, a hale and hearty chew-your-slippers kind of pup. My total outlay included spaying of both pups and totaled \$100.

I named the quiet one Mousse, as in chocolate mousse, because of her sweet nature and middle-brown coat. Her sister, who was an absolute terror whenever she wasn’t sleeping, earned the name Bayer for her pain-in-the-butt tendencies. I immediately lost much of my heart to the two of them.

Our farm is surrounded by woodlots and other farms. No Trespassing signs are often ignored. One evening, shortly after they turned three, Mousse and Bayer were wandering our property. Bayer found a yummy chunk of fresh liver and dove to claim it for her own. It was bait, and a Conibear trap snapped shut on her neck. By the time Mousse came home to let me know Bayer needed help, it was too late. She had been strangled. We had her cremated and buried her ashes on the top of a ridge on the West side of our property. She shares that spot with about twenty other family pets, and every time we have to make another hole for another pet, sorrow hangs over our work for days.

Since then we have adopted another pup, a Boxer/Pitty mix named Tank. He resembles an Abrams in stature and is spoiled rotten. Mousse immediately adopted the pup as her own and she still corrects his behavior on a daily basis. But this story isn’t about Bayer or Tank. This story is about Mousse.

A month ago, shortly after turning seven, Mousse began to drink much more water than usual. Her abdomen became swollen to the point that her appearance

became much more like a barrel than her usual svelte, overactive adult dog look. She stopped chasing rabbits. She ate in drips and drabs, never really consuming her daily dog ration. She became very “sticky,” constantly wanting to touch and be touched. She gained 27 pounds in two weeks. It was obvious that she needed to visit the vet.

The vet visit took an hour, requiring blood samples, urine tests, and a stool exam. I feared it might be heartworm, something that could be managed and while limiting her physical activity could still be chronic rather than fatal.

I was wrong. The samples showed that her liver is failing, forcing her kidneys to overload. The distended gut is the result of literally being full of water, which is an effect of her kidneys beginning to fail. All of the signs point to cancer. The speed of the onset is something of a predictor for how long Mousse has to live.

We now have medications we give her twice a day. One, a small bottle containing 40 tablets, bears the ominous instruction to give her one and a half tablets twice a day “for life.” She is swinging back and forth between good days and bad days. She is in no pain and as long as that remains true we will simply love her and keep her home with us.

Tuesday and Wednesday were bad days. All she wanted to do was lie in the back seat of my truck and sleep. Fortunately the cab is well insulated and between her own body heat and sun streaming in through the windows she has a nice, warm place to call her own. I got her out a few times for potty breaks, but she lacked the strength to get into the truck by herself so I had to lift her in and out.

Today has been a good day. She stomped her way through two-foot snowdrifts to play, and even worked up enough strength to catch a cottontail and eat most of it. She won't eat the food the vet wanted her to eat, so we're back to her favorite – Old Roy from Walmart. She gets lots of treats. I hide her meds inside of hotdogs, so she hasn't yet begun to spit out the pills.

In a week or so all the snow will be gone. Then, Tank, Mousse, Lila, and I will walk over to the ridge and see where best to put our girl. I'm thinking it's a tossup between a space beside her sister or just above Molly's bed. Given the fact that this dog adopted me, she may have some strong opinion about where to spend her afterlife.

The Internet is no philosophical marvel, but I saw something heartening yesterday: “Heaven is the place where all the pets you have ever known run to greet you.” Wow. Molly and Pepper, Cookie and Blue, Mousse and Bayer, Toby, Shadow,

Darker, Ishmael, Harley, Peanut, Loki, and dozens more. I'll have to tell the mortician to pack my coffin with treats!