



Jet

By Gail MacMillan

It happened in the early autumn of Jet's first year. Our twelve-year-old daughter Joan had just been diagnosed with a rare and potentially life-threatening blood disease. In the hospital, bruised and weak from transfusions, she'd begged for a day's reprieve to go to the country with her parents and her Black Lab pup, eleven-month-old Jet of Acamac the Third. After much deliberation, the doctor had agreed.

It was a gray September Sunday. Clouds hung low in a charcoal sky. We were packing to go home late in the afternoon when Jet, galloping joyfully after a squirrel, dashed into the path of an oncoming car. We heard tires squeal and the simultaneous screams from girl and dog.

When we reached the road, we found a deathly pale teenager kneeling in the ditch, an immobile pup clutched in her arms. A distressed motorist stood over them muttering, "I'm sorry. He ran right out in front of me. I couldn't stop in time. Is he alive? Will he be okay?"

Jet was breathing, but just barely. We gently wrapped him in quilts and loaded him into the back of our station wagon. Joan crouched in the hatchback, holding the dog's head, whispering words of love and encouragement.

My husband kept glancing into the rearview mirror as we drove toward the city. Each time our eyes met, I knew we were both wondering what would happen to our fragile daughter if she lost her friend. The doctor had warned us against exposing her to emotional stress.

Sunday has to be the worst day of the week to find your vet. Ours was no exception. He was out of town, his answering service informed us. If it was an emergency, we were to call his retired predecessor.

That veterinarian was a kindly, but rather outdated old gentleman. He took one look at our pup and declared there was no hope.

“Have Tom put him down when he gets back tomorrow morning,” he said sadly. “It’ll be best. He’s paralyzed.”

Joan expressed no emotion at his words, but her blue eyes turned sapphire hard. My husband and I both knew that look. She wasn’t about to accept the diagnosis, not for a minute.

We drove home in silence.

“Put him on my bed,” Joan said when we arrived. Her tone allowed for no argument or refusal.

When the pup was laid as comfortably as possible in the center of her bed, I turned to her.

“Honey, it’s only for tonight. Tomorrow...”

“I don’t want to hear it!” she cried, throwing up her hands to cover her ears. Her arm hit her bedside lamp and sent it crashing to the floor.

In an instant, Jet was on his feet, staggering, falling over the edge of the bed onto the floor. Leaning against the wall, his eyes glazed with shock, pain, and confusion, tongue lolling out of his mouth, the big pup stared up at us.

“He’s not paralyzed!” Joan was on her knees beside him, kissing him, tears rolling down her cheeks. “He’s going to be all right, I know it!”

An hour later, she was still cradling Jet in her arms when I gently broached the subject of her return to the hospital.

“Let me talk to Dr. Henry,” she said. “He’ll understand. He’ll know I have to stay with Jet tonight.”

Ten minutes later, she handed the phone to me.

“He wants to talk to you,” she said, then hurried back to be with her pup.

“I’ve decided to let her stay home tonight,” the doctor informed me. “She’d never rest away from him. But bring her in tomorrow for a blood test. I’m concerned about how all this stress is affecting her condition. And let’s keep our fingers crossed for the pup. She can’t afford to lose him at this point.”

That night, girl and dog slept in a tangle of quilts and pillows on the living room floor. Early in the morning, we eased the big pup out of her arms and carried him out to the car. If he had to be put down, better to have it done before she was awake, before she had to say good-bye.

But our vet gave us wonderful news. After examining Jet, he told us he believed that with hospitalization and a lot of TLC, the pup could recover. How fully, Dr. Larsen couldn’t be sure, but he did believe the Lab deserved the chance to explore the possibilities.

Over the following months and years, the girl and her dog required much specialized care. There were lengthy periods of hospitalization for both. Jet lost part of one paw to infection and Joan needed multiple blood transfusions. Both had to take life much slower and more cautiously than the average girl and dog. But each time they beat their illnesses, life became just

a little more precious to them. Struggling back to health, they were drawn inextricably closer and closer in their quiet celebration of joie de vivre.

They even discovered there were plusses to their disabilities. At this reduced pace, they both had time to savor the hamburgers, to study the birds and flowers and bullfrogs along the way. Together they enjoyed summer showers, autumn sunsets, Christmas snowfall, and the first pussy willows of spring.

And what if one was a little too pale and the other walked with a limp? Their days were filled with the joy of lives full of precious moments, moments they might never have been granted.

Ron and I watched and learned. The doctors and hospitals taught us how to care for Joan physically and emotionally. Jet, however, was another matter. Here, trial and error kicked in. And Jet, with his unfailing good nature, generously accepted our haphazard methods of coming to terms with his disability.

The first thing we learned was that caregivers must be careful not to allow the animal's physical challenge to become a license for all sort of unruliness. Allowing discipline to lapse is as injurious to the dog as it can be annoying to the owner and everyone else who encounters it. Dogs don't pity themselves. They're eternal optimists. There is no reason for an owner to feel undue sympathy and use it as an excuse for bad behavior.

In fact, a physically challenged dog should be especially well trained and disciplined. Due to its physical handicap, it may not be as swift to react to danger as it otherwise would be. Lameness, blindness, deafness, etc. all affect performance. It is imperative that you watch out for him more carefully than you would a completely sound animal and that the dog obeys your commands instantly.

Then you must learn what your physically challenged dog is capable of, and expect no less of him. Realize his stamina may be less than that of other dogs, but also allow him to do what he's capable of doing. Don't let him become a wimp. Swimming gamely through icy waters with other Labs, Jet retrieved well into late November each year until age became a factor. He raced after rabbits with our beagles and floundered through winter drifts as we snowshoed through the bush. He tired more easily than other Labs his size and age, but he did his best and was content with it.

Jet even managed to give Dr. Larsen a kind of partial payment for saving his life. As a result of his constant and compassionate care of the chronically lame Lab, our vet was given an award by Pets Magazine for outstanding service to a patient.

These days handicapped dogs are becoming a more common sight, not because more animals are experiencing more disabling accidents, but because more owners are opting to maintain them. In the not-too-distant past, it was almost a rule of thumb that injured dogs were put down. But now, with more enlightened views and improved veterinary techniques, most people are deciding to keep their less than perfect companions. They're discovering how wonderfully special these creatures can become.

Jet definitely did. His courage and cheerfulness served as a daily lesson on how to celebrate life to the fullest, no matter what its hardships. He and Joan linked their spirits in a desire to survive and celebrate life. And while we were busy not letting him feel different from other dogs, Jet was just as busy forever etching his memory into our hearts.

When he died at age sixteen, Joan a young teacher by then with her disease in remission, was heart broken. For days tears and a crippling sense of lose overwhelmed her. Then a sympathy card arrived from a friend.

“That which you have cherished with your heart you can never lose,” it read.

Joan recognized the truth in those words. Stoically she placed Jet’s picture on her bedside table and found the strength to get on with her life.

She’d realized, like Ron and me, that although Jet was gone he’d definitely never be forgotten. He’d been a joy and an inspiration all the days of his life. We can only and always be grateful that this wonderful dog was a part of our lives for so many years.