

This Story Will Break Your Heart

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

Molly was a Treeing Walker Coonhound who came to live with us through a rescue group. The first years of her life she had been owned by a bear hunter and trained to hunt bear, a terrible turn of luck for her. Despite a decade of loving care in our home, she never recovered from the ritual torture she endured at his hands.

For forty years my husband and I have given a home to many rescue dogs and we thought we'd seen it all: neglected dogs, starved dogs, chained dogs, hypothermic dogs, abused dogs but none of them prepared us for Molly's behavior and the level of terror she experienced.

Molly was not a bear dog by nature and to become one her hunter owner had to extinguish her innate small prey drive. Trying to do so required unfathomable cruelty, and the terror of that cruelty informed every single day of her life and ours too for the ten years we lived with her.

She was skin and bones when she arrived and we wondered how she survived the brutal Vermont winters, tied outside like she was in all weather. We wondered why anything that sounded like steel storage drums—not only thunder, but also empty dump trucks banging and timpani drums in orchestral music—made her run non-stop in hysterical circles along the fence in our yard or next to the walls inside our house. Then we learned that a common bear dog training method involves rolling dogs in steel drums with “trash” animals, small animals killed for this purpose. Was this how the cartilage around her eyes was broken, her head slamming around inside a steel drum? Or maybe it was broken in the routine beatings she received at his hands?

She suffered terrible dread. Pick up trucks driving by our house made her run for cover and if they were playing loud music she'd

become apoplectic. Did she think the monster had come back for her? And riding in a car made her want to dissolve, literally. She trembled in fear and saturated bath towels with drool. Did she think she was going back to him?

He never broke her for bear but he broke her forever.

In response to 2022 legislation intended to help dogs like Molly, Vermont Fish and Wildlife has simply, and defiantly, added shock collars to the mix as a way to control the dogs. That's nothing new. Hunters have used them for decades. I'm sure Molly was shocked repeatedly. She died of a broken heart, a mitral valve problem. But the metaphor works as well.

