

Cookie: A Dedication

Gary Paulsen¹

Though I ran sled dogs for close to ten years, did some twenty-two thousand miles with them, this book is not about sled dogs or running them. They were truly wonderful and I have written of them in other books. This book is about other dogs in my life and other times. I am—I say this with some pride and not a little wonder—a “dog person.” I make no excuses for unabashedly loving them— all of them, even some that have bitten me. I have always had dogs and will have dogs until I die. I have rescued dozens of dogs from pounds, always have five or six of them around me, and cannot imagine living without dogs. They are wonderful and, I think, mandatory for decent human life.

All that said, there are some dogs that are different, special in amazing ways. Josh is one, and you’ll read about him later in this book. Cookie was another.

Cookie was my lead dog when I first started to run dogs, and she was also my lead dog in my first Iditarod sled dog race; she took me from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska, when most people—including me—thought I couldn’t do it.

But she was more. She was a good friend, a kind of dogsister or dogmother to me, and while I have written much of her in other places, she belongs in this book, too.

Cookie was given to me by a man who thought she was so sick she couldn’t run any longer. She merely had worms, and when I wormed her she became a wonderful sled dog, and then a wonderful lead dog.

I did not set out to race dogs; I used them for work. I brought in wood with them, went to the Laundromat in town with them (it was grand to tie the dogs up to the parking meter and watch people jump as they walked by) and trapped with them.

In January of 1980 I was running a seventy-five-mile line, trapping beaver. I had previously trapped with a friend, but this year I was trapping alone, not the wisest thing to do, since there is some risk from bad ice or injuries and it’s better to have a companion. I was alone when I made a mistake that nearly killed me.

The ice around beaver lodges is very dangerous. Beavers live in their lodges and come out of underwater tunnels to get food they have stored at the bottom of the river or pond through the summer, in the form of branches stuck down in the mud. Each time they come out they let air out of their noses and it goes up to make bubbles under the surface of the ice, and this, along with the beavers’ rubbing their backs on the underside of the ice, keeps the ice very thin near a beaver lodge. It can be fifty below with two-foot-thick ice around the whole lake and the ice near the lodge might be less than a quarter inch thick.

I had parked the sled near a lodge and unpacked the gear needed to set a group of snares. Cookie was leading the work team of five dogs and they knew the procedure completely by this time. As soon as I stopped the sled and began to unpack they all lay down, curled their tails over their noses and went to sleep. The process could take

85 two or three hours and they used the
time to get rest.

A rope tied the cargo to the sled. I
threw the rope across the ice to get it
out of the way. One end was still tied
90 to the sled. I took a step on the ice near
the rope and went through and down
like a stone.

You think there is time to react,
that the ice will give way slowly and
95 you’ll be able to hang on to the edge,
somehow able to struggle to safety. It’s
not that way at all. It’s as if you were
suddenly standing on air. The bottom
drops out and you go down.

100 I was wearing heavy clothing and a
parka. It gathered water like a sponge
and took me down faster.

Two things saved me. One, as I
went down my hand fell across the
105 rope I had thrown across the ice, which
was still tied to the sled.

Two, as I dropped I had time to
yell—scream—and the last thing I saw
as I went under was Cookie’s head
110 swinging up from sleeping and her
eyes locking on mine as I went beneath
the surface.

The truth is I shouldn’t have lived.
I have had several friends killed in just
115 this manner—dropping through the ice
while running dogs—and there wasn’t
much of a chance for me. The water
was ten or twelve feet deep. I saw all
the bubbles from my clothing going up
120 to the surface and I tried to pull myself
up on the rope. My hands slipped and I
thought in a wild, mental scream of
panic that this was how it would end.

Then the rope tightened. There was
125 a large noose-knot on the end and it
tightened and started pulling up and
when the knot hit I grabbed and held
and the dogs pulled me out of the hole
and back up onto the ice. There was
130 still very little time. I had a quart of

white-gas stove fuel on the sled for
emergencies and I threw it on a pine
tree nearby and lit a match and set the
whole tree on fire and, in the heat, got
135 my clothes off and crawled into a
sleeping bag. I stood inside it and held
my clothes near the flame to dry them.

I would have died if not for Cookie.

She saw me drop, instantly ana-
140 lyzed the situation, got the team up—
she must have jerked them to their
feet—got them pulling, and they pulled
me out.

That was January 1980. It is now
145 1997 as I write this, and everything that
has happened in the last seventeen
years—everything: Iditarods, published
books, love, living, life—all of it, in-
cluding this book, I owe to Cookie.

150 This book is dedicated to her
memory.

¹ This dedication appears on pages 1 – 7 of *My Life in Dog Years*, written by Gary Paulsen and published in 1998 by Delacorte Press.