

There is nothing that I can

say in the next nine hundred words that will convey the life that Montana lived, nor the depth of his personality. There are no words that can come close to letting you glimpse the sheer beauty and magnificence of Montana's spirit. All that I can do is relay a lesson for him that he strived to teach me, a gift that was whispered on the wind from one to another in the form of a howl.

When I first met Montana there was nothing that ailed him physically, mentally, or spiritually. You'd often find him lounging in his favorite spot under the doug-fir tree in the center of his enclosure, trying to keep his beautiful black coat from soaking up any more sunshine. On a rare occasion, you'd see him play with his mate Tina, but more often than not he would reject her offers to play and instead go find a spot to oversee his surroundings and observe his neighboring wolves. Montana liked initiating group howls among the wolves in the sanctuary, literally becoming the epicenter of a wild choir. His howl was very distinct, you could distinguish it cutting through the plethora of other voices being cast into the air. It always started out very sharp and then plateaued to a very thin ghostly howl. Sometimes you would catch Montana howling by himself atop his mound waiting for it to be echoed back. On occasion I would answer his howl with the best howl I could muster up; he would stop and look at me with a bewildered look, only to start howling again. All and all, Montana was living a peaceful life of leisure. One day during rounds Montana was observed limping on his back right leg. Initially we didn't worry too much since it is such a common sight among a lot of the animals here. Generally, it's a case where the animal was playing too hard, or misplaced his or her foot incurring a slight injury, but nothing to be too concerned about. To avoid catching him up and potentially stressing him out over an injury that would likely heal on its own, we decided to treat his limp medicinally and reassess in a couple of days. A few days went by and he wasn't responding to the treatment well, so the decision was made to bring him in to see our veterinarian. Montana had his back right knee xrayed, which revealed something horrific: Montana had Osteosarcoma (bone cancer) in his knee. There wasn't

anything we could do for him.

Our veterinarian gave Montana four months before the disease took Montana's life. The only thing we could do was to make the rest of Montana's life as comfortable and happy as possible. The veterinarian prescribed powerful painkillers to help dull Montana's pain and make it more bearable for him to get around. At first the pain killers seemed to help Montana get around without limping as much but there was one main drawback to the pills, they were keeping him drugged constantly. Montana eventually stopped taking them all together. It is my belief that he stopped taking the pills because he did not want to spend the last of his days in a drugged haze.

The disease didn't even slow him down at all. He was getting around just fine, his appetite wasn't hampered in the slightest, and he still kept the same daily activities of roaming around his enclosure looking for different vantage points to observe his kingdom and its inhabitants. When you were with him you just got a feeling that he was happy to be alive – disease or not. Montana's spirit was still bright and full of life, his body might have started to slow down but it clearly did not affect him.

I often found myself stopping at his enclosure and becoming overwhelmed with this sadness for Montana... feeling it was unfair that he was dying right in front of us and there was nothing that we could do to help our friend. I wished many times that I could take the disease from him and let him live a "good" life. While I would sit there crying not knowing what to do to help him through this terminal struggle, Montana would start howling by himself. While he was howling I would just sit there thinking to myself that he must be howling this way because he knows that he is dying. My ignorance continued for sometime like this. Little did I know that feeling sorry for Montana was the worst thing that I could do for my friend, filling his last memories with sorrow and sadness. I was focusing so much on Montana's inevitable death that I started to forget that he was still alive and enjoying his days. I started seeing Montana as an osteosarcoma patient, not Montana. Montana wasn't sad or unhappy he was dying, just like I was on the inside; the only difference was that he was living every day to the fullest not worrying about the end or the amount of time left but instead focusing on the present.

Toward the end of Montana's time the signs of the disease were very clear. His leg had reached the size of a cantaloupe, he stopped eating, and he became very lethargic. It was hard to see him in this frail state struggling to hold on. In the end his

body became too weak to support him. The decision was made to help put an end to his suffering. Montana died in the presence of people that loved him at his home.