



Ella, photo credit: [Tracey Conway](#)

The Dog Who Didn't Love Me

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My unrequited love — Ella, a sleek and elegant Siberian husky, with icy-blue eyes and the leanness of a racing horse. I first approached Ella, expecting a nuzzle or a lick. Instead, I was greeted with the most skeptical disinterest I've ever felt from any animal — or human.

Ella is the first dog who hasn't returned my affection. Her preferred person, my neighbor, Tracey, kindly shares her Siberian Husky with me on our daily walks in Seattle. But Ella is Teflon to my devout adoration. Prancing with such startling strength and agility; Ella could be a gymnast. But she deigns to keep pace with us. When we walk down the city streets together, passersby comment on Ella's beauty. Gang members brake mid-cruise, roll down their windows to offer a rather intimidating thumbs up; elders coo and fawn over Ella and ask us how long we've been together.

"She doesn't belong to me," I say with that familiar pang of pain.

On our daily walks, Ella gazes right past me. Instead, she turns her wolf-eyes up to Tracey with a blazing gaze of belief as if caught up in religious fervor. I think of St. Theresa of Avila who levitated when she prayed. Ella's expression echoes that saint's fierce grace and possessive zeal. In our love triangle, I am the one who is always edged out.

So, I began my crusade for Ella's affection with bribes of her favorite salmon treat. Ella eyed me suspiciously, flipped her head, and turned away. What was it about me that Ella found so offensive? She was sometimes friendly with others. We began an experiment to figure out why my love was so unrequited. Why was she so leery of me? Pheromones? Did I resemble someone who had traumatized her as a puppy? We knew that Ella was afraid of teenage boys and skateboards.

I was working on a natural history book about wolves. Perhaps Ella picked up on this energy and, as in all wild wolf societies, was figuring out our hierarchy? After all, Siberian huskies were the last canines to be domesticated; the black slashes on their thick tails reveal this recent wolf ancestry. They will run wild, no matter how bonded they are to their human families. Research shows that wolves will hold direct and non-submissive eye contact with humans; domesticated dogs will not.

Ella's typical expression upon greeting me, 2013 photo: [Tracey Conway](#)

I began to study Ella on our first walks and noticed that as I got near her, her ears pricked back warily. I did not try to touch or engage with her. I could be aloof, as well.

With other people, Ella would often make the first gesture of friendship, sidling along their legs or letting them scratch her ears. Watching Ella allow such affection with others filled me with despair and envy.

Sometimes I just cancelled our walks if I was having a rough day and didn't want to be so profoundly ignored.

One thing I did notice about Ella. When I was quiet and sitting in a chair near her, she'd give me quick, sidelong glances that were pensive and penetrating. Maybe she was like an alpha wolf trying to decide my role in her canine hierarchy. Sometimes she'd sniff my skin as if snow were falling over us and melting onto her dense fur.

One rainy afternoon, I got a panicked call from Tracey. "Oh, my God," she howled, "Ella got into our garbage, full of old coffee grounds, Tylenol, and some cancer meds from my sister. I'm at the vet hospital. Please *come!*"

In the waiting room Tracey was sobbing with guilt and grief. “I’ve killed my dog,” she cried.

Coming from a medical family, I knew this compost was terribly toxic, a long- shot survival. It was probable that this beautiful dog would not survive such an overdose of meds and caffeine.

The vet echoed this soberly when she gave us the report. “We’ve pumped her stomach with charcoal and are watching to see if her kidneys and liver can process such a toxic load. She’s on fluids to wash out the poisons. All we can do is watch and wait.”

Tracey bent her head into her hands and sobbed without any sound, just shuddering. I sat with the dazed stoicism of my medical and military family, nodding at the vet.

“Can we see Ella?” I asked.

“Let me do another set of vitals and maybe she’s strong enough to walk out to the waiting room,” the vet answered. “It might do her good to be with her people right now.”

As she stumbled toward us, Ella’s body seemed flattened out, like a one-dimensional cave drawing. Fluffy tail tucked between her legs, her head hung low. She smelled of charcoal, alcohol, and diarrhea. Her eyes were glazed and weeping, those white eyelashes caked with phlegm. She barely had the energy to lay down at Tracey’s

feet before she closed her eyes and let out a sigh of utter exhaustion. Tracey stopped crying and I started humming one of Ella's favorite lullabies.

I stayed very still, slowly reaching out a hand to Ella's wet head. No response. Another huff and sigh from her, then nothing. Finally, Ella jerked up on her legs, unsteady as a newborn foal. She lurched and then surprised both of us by falling against my knees. Her weight was so light as if she were fading away right before us.

They say that time stands still in the moment of death. But there was nothing still in the waiting room. Screaming animals and desperate people running around us. The commotion didn't seem to register on Ella. But something made her raise her snout and look directly up at me. In Ella's eyes, with that heart-shaped silvery gray mask surrounding numinous blue, there was something startling. I wondered if I would see her pupils dilate or fix like they do right before death.

But instead, Ella's eyes opened very wide, as if seeing me for the first time. It was a fiercely steady gaze, as if she was fixing on some distant, navigational point. As if I were her True North by which this ancestral sled dog might find her way home. Then, she sighed and tenderly laid her head on my knees. She closed her eyes, resting.

I sat very still, not daring to touch her, wondering if these were her last moments. Amazed and humbled that they were with me.

Finally, the vet tech came in for vitals and suggested that Ella might be recovered enough to go outside. “Let her sniff the earth and piss out toxins.”

We had to lift Ella up to walk. Outside in that Seattle afternoon, the rain dappled scarlet rhododendrons so brightly, as if the plants had dropped acid.



Ella, 2019

Tracey was calmer now. Ella had made it through the night. “Why don’t you come back tonight after labs?” the vet tech said. “We’ll know more then.”

Late that night, Tracey gratefully took Ella home; they spooned together in her bed. As Ella healed, I was again relegated to wallpaper. No more intense gazes from Ella. No gratitude to show any deepening bond between us. I was left out — again. It both heartened and made me yearn for her more. Are there options for unrequited love? What does it teach about perseverance or detachment?

What is unrequited love but the tenderest longing for those who cannot return our devotion? But maybe it’s something else — a clarity that allows us to recognize that sometimes we are just, well, *not* loved at all. Sometimes we are thoroughly eclipsed, passing unseen through another person’s story. An anecdote, a very minor character. When we’re not the main character in our love story, what more can we see? What do we learn about ourselves?



Ella, fall, 2020 photo: [Tracey Conway](#)

I learned that I can still love someone who has very little interest in me. I learned that hope can sometimes be an illusion. Acceptance of what is given—that's the lesson. I still try to bribe Ella with treats to gain her affection. She's coming around, slowly. Sometimes she even rests her lovely head on my arm. That's when I get a vivid flashback of Ella leaning against me when she was struggling for her life — when she had eyes only for me. It is enough. It is everything.~

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