

# Gracie's Story

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## As told to Russ and Donna Sherwin, on board M/V *Four Seasons*

I don't know much about my early days. I know I'm a German Shepherd, and people have been saying something that sounds like "gray-sea" whenever they look at me or want me to do something, so I guess that's my name. I don't even know how old I am. I think I was born around 2000, and this is 2006, so that makes me....6? (That's PhD math for a dog, you know.)

I had a somewhat confusing puppy hood. I remember being in snow, and I really, really like these things called pickup trucks. My present owners have had to pull me out of the back of several pickups because I have this irresistible urge to jump in. In January of 2004, I found myself being cared for in a home for wayward dogs in Kent, Washington. I'm not sure how or why I got there. I don't think I did anything bad, and I don't think anyone did anything bad to me, life just takes its twists and turns and you never know how it's going to turn out.



I liked it well enough in Kent, I guess. There were a lot of other dogs of mixed breeds around that I could romp with. I tend to be a little rough sometimes, so they would not always play with me, but it was a good enough life. I was hoping someone would come along to adopt me that had a ranch or something, someplace I could run and chase things, but as it happened, I ended up on something I had never seen before called a boat.



Let me back up a little here. My present owners showed up one day at the place in Kent, and we immediately liked each other. I went for a walk with them, and they gave the human that ran the home some pieces of paper, and then they put me in their car. I like cars just fine. This was a van, and

was very comfortable. The human that I came to know as Donna sat in back with me. I had a brand new collar with new tags and everything, and I looked pretty spiffy.

But there was an immediate visit to the vet! They didn't do anything awful to me, though. They just looked me over, gave me a bath, and pretty soon I was back in the van. I was tuckered out from all the stress, and I laid my head down in Donna's lap and slept most of the way. It was a long ride. I got to get out several times and run around and pee on things, and smell stuff, and there was even some snow here and there I could roll in.

When we arrived "home", there was lots of snow on the ground. We walked down a long, narrow thing called a dock, and came to a thing floating in the water. There were lots of things like it floating in the water, and I came to understand that they were called boats. I had never seen one before, and I didn't know how to get on. Turns out it's pretty easy once you know how. You just have to jump over a little patch of water between the dock and the boat. I learned the command "get on your boat" fairly fast, and within a few days I could run down the dock and find it by myself when we came back from a walk.



The first thing I learned is that boats are constantly in motion. It disturbed me at first, because I wobbled a little when I walked around, but I got used to it. This place where the boat was turned out to be Port Sidney Marina, in Sidney, British Columbia. Life rapidly settled into a pleasant routine of walkies, some training, treats, and regular meals. Donna and the other one, who seemed to be called Russ, were very good to me and we got along fine. For about two weeks, though, I was upset and a little stressed. You see, I had been moved around a good deal in my youth, and just when I thought I was going to stay someplace, I got moved again. So I was

prepared for this situation, too, to come to an end, but it didn't.

The boat is quite an interesting home. It has little passageways and rooms you can explore, and the best part was, Donna and Russ let me come down and snuggle up with them on their bed. I tried it once because I was feeling a little lonesome one morning, and they thought it was very cute, but after that, they made me stay down until I was invited. It wasn't hard to get an invitation; I would just stand at the top of the stairs and whine softly until they woke up and said, "OK, Gracie". I would bound down the stairs and up onto the bed. Oh, it was heaven! But then one day I just stopped doing that. I really can't say why. It just doesn't seem PC anymore.



Then one day, the boat growled! It really did! I'm not making this up! There was something in the basement that made an awful noise. I had seen into the door of the basement, and I had not seen any animals in there, only a big white lump of metal, but here it was growling away. And then, the boat itself started moving. Not just a little bit back and forth like it had always done, but it was actually leaving the dock. I ran out onto the front part (I am now smart enough to know that's the bow) and watched as we went past all the other boats (some had dogs on them too) and out through the entrance onto the biggest patch of

water I had ever seen in my life! Forgive the overuse of exclamation points here, but it really was astonishing. It was new, exciting and a little scary, but I really liked it.

After a while, we came back and tied the boat up to the dock again. Life resumed where it had left off. Except now there was a new aspect to my training. I was expected to pee on the front part of the boat! No way, Jose! I'm a respectable girl; I just don't do those things. Donna and Russ put a piece of grass on the front of the boat and told me to go there. Uh-uh! They tried a mat; that didn't look any better to me. We spent two agonizing days on this program, with me nearly ready to explode. Why couldn't they just take me up to the grass like we had always done? Why pee here?



They didn't give me any choice. Finally, after two days, I couldn't hold it any longer, so I peed on the mat. This seemed to delight Russ and Donna to no end. They told all their friends about it, and gave me treats, and petted me and called me a good dog. I was

mortified. Then they tried to get me to do it again. What, again? I did it once, that's enough! Let's go back to the grass. This time I waited 36 hours before I gave in. Again they were delighted. Go figure!

But that wasn't the worst part. Then they wanted me to poop on the mat. No, I thought. You can't be serious! But finally, I had to. My degradation was complete. After that, strangely, we resumed our regular walks and I was able to do these things on the grass once again. Humans are very strange sometimes.

It soon became clear, however, that there was a reason for all this. One day, the boat started growling again, and we left Sidney. That night, instead of returning to our dock, we anchored in a lovely bay where I could see the shore, but couldn't get to it. I was, once again, prompted to pee on the mat. I did so, reluctantly, but with less reservation than before. It seemed to be not only OK, but expected. And besides, land was a long ways away. Every morning for the next several days, the thing in the basement started growling and we moved from one place to another over simply huge expanses of water. Once in a while we went ashore and walked around. I snuck in a pee or two whenever I could, expecting to be chastised, but that seemed to be OK, too. The peeing rules are very complex.



But gradually we came to an understanding. If they wanted pee and poop on the deck, so be it. Each time, they would praise me, give me treats, and call me good dog, so I guess it was all right. Then they would clean it up. I came to expect that; I mean, if I'm going to do that on the deck, I want it cleaned right away! If they forgot, I wouldn't even go to

the mat. I have my principles.

My humans wanted me to chase things. I would do it when they threw something like a ball or a stick on land, but then they started throwing it into the water. The first time, I ran out up to my ankles and turned around and looked at them. I was thinking, if you want that back, you're going to have to get it yourself. So they did. Then they threw it really close to me, and by going into the water up to my chest, I got it. See, I had never seen that much water in one place – well, around the boat, yeah, but not around me! They started throwing it a little further, and I could see what they were up to. Gradually, I got deeper into the water until one day I had to swim. Well! It was scary, but it was also fun. I didn't really know how to swim, and I beat the water with my paws, making little headway and a lot of froth. Finally, after a few weeks of that, I learned to keep my paws under the water and I made a lot more forward speed. Then a few weeks more, and voila! I was a swimmer. Yeah! Throw that thing! I'll get it!

I began hearing words like “Alaska”, and “Glacier Bay” and we stopped at very interesting places. Some of them had docks like Sidney and I got to go for walks and explore them. By now I was getting pretty good at peeing on the bow when I had to, and on land when the opportunity presented itself. It didn't seem to matter to Donna and Russ, except that when we were on land and I pooped, they scooped it up and put it in a bag! I haven't yet figured out why they have such an attachment to the stuff, but Oh Well.

Oh! I know what I wanted to tell you! About the bears! Boy, do they ever smell funny! You can tell there's a bear around long before you can see them. Well, I can, anyway. They look like really big dogs, all furry and stuff. But something tells me they are not to be messed with. I would scent the air, and I could tell what direction the bear was, and after a while my humans could find it too.

Once I got to play with a big chunk of glacier ice. I banged it around on the boat deck for an



hour or more. It was really fun.

The fish were interesting too. Russ pulls them out of the water with a long thin line, and they flop around on the deck, and they smell really great. I like to lick them. I stick my nose into the cooler and watch them thrash around.

I frequently got to go out in the dinghy to set the crab trap. When we pulled it in, there were these spidery things that I just loved. They had really pinchy things on the ends of their legs though, and I learned they weren't to be trifled with. They sure taste good, though. Once, in a sort of brain spasm that I can't explain, I reached past Russ and grabbed half a crab he was cleaning. I don't know what got into me. I was severely chastised, and I won't do it again.



Then life changed again. I could tell by the fact that the sun came up on the other side of the boat that we were going in the other direction. South, they called it. And we started traveling for longer periods of time. In fact, sometimes we didn't stop for several days. I had to learn how to pee and poop when the boat was really being tossed around by the rough water. I didn't like being thrown around, but I could tell that my two adopted humans didn't like it much either, so I didn't say anything. It seemed to be something we all had to endure.

We finally got to a place called San Diego where we rested for a while. And guess what? My humans went out and got a pickup truck! And a thing called a trailer that goes on the back. And we took a long trip pulling the trailer behind us, and I loved it! Could it be that this is the start of another adventure? I hope so.

## Editor's Note

Many of Gracie's notes were difficult to decipher. Some bore the marks of kibble bits having been dropped on them, and some had big, muddy paw prints. It is also true that English is not Gracie's first language, though she does pretty well. I did the best I could, and I hope I captured the essence of Gracie's experiences. I asked her if she wanted to proofread this, but she just looked at me.

Russ Sherwin

