

Zola
By Rhonda Ashurst

Published in Best Friends Magazine, July/August, 2005.

The day I first met her, I was struck by her intense energy and the keen, unflinching intelligence in her brown eyes. I had visions of a less aggressive, mellower companion. I was lonely, having just moved to the San Luis Valley. I lived by myself in an old trailer with a big yard west of Alamosa. I wanted a dog.

A co-worker, I'll call her "C", approached me one day and told me she had a dog that needed a new home. Would I like to meet her? We went to her place that afternoon. She explained to me that, though she loved this dog, she couldn't keep her. Zola was fighting with their Akita, a much larger animal, and wouldn't back down no matter how badly she was hurt. In an attempt to protect her, they kept her in a cage in the kitchen during the day and had an elaborate system to keep the dogs separated in the evenings. C was concerned that the confinement was making Zola neurotic.

After five minutes with her, I was in agreement with this diagnosis. I had never seen such a frenetic canine. She raced around the house, grabbing toys out of a wicker basket in the corner and bringing them to us to be thrown. She was lightning fast and very insistent, which resulted in non-stop toy tossing interspersed with conversation.

There were two things I noticed: (1) she never jumped on me, but remained at a respectful distance after dropping the toy, barking if we ignored her too long (2) she wouldn't let me touch her. This seemed at odds with the wild exuberance she displayed, and the way she stared straight into my eyes. I asked about her history, trying to figure out these conflicting observations.

C told me she'd taken Zola in after she was found in the car of a homeless woman who was hospitalized for a mental condition. Apparently, she was never able to care for the dog again. It was hard to say what Zola had been through in her early life. C was clearly attached to her and had cared for her for some time, hoping the situation with the Akita (her husband's dog) would improve. It hadn't. Zola simply refused to back down.

The moment came in our conversation when I needed to make a decision. I looked over at the small cage in the middle of the kitchen floor, barely big enough for her to turn around. I thought about this vibrant animal spending most of her life in there, and I agreed to take her in. A few days later, C brought her to my trailer, along with the toy basket, bowls, collar, leash, and the cage. There were tears in her eyes and I admired the courage it took for her to let go of her dog. I was grateful for the gift she was giving me, even though I had some doubts about my own ability to deal with such an intense animal.

Zola raced around the trailer and the yard, checking out her new surroundings. She pulled a toy from the box and brought it to me; I threw it for her. I was soon to realize that this was her friend-making ritual. C, satisfied that Zola would be ok, made a tearful departure down my front steps. Zola jumped up on the couch overlooking the driveway and watched her go. She looked at me when the car was out of sight as if to say, "Now what?"

I will never forget what she did next. She made another round of the trailer and then she went back into the cage which was now sitting in the middle of my kitchen floor. She sat inside her sanctuary, crossed her paws daintily, laid her head down on them and looked over her eyelashes at me. Something caught in my throat—an unnamed ball of emotion. I knew I was witnessing something larger in that timeless moment. It was an

act that spoke volumes about the universal themes of freedom and self-imposed imprisonment. As a psychotherapist, I was to share this story many times with my clients who sought freedom from their own inner prisons. For me, it became symbolic of all the ways we cage ourselves in safe, but confining spaces, certain it is the best way to survive.

I could not convince her to leave the cage. It seemed to be a familiar place for her in the midst of this new and frightening freedom. I left it for a couple of days, understanding that it was an important touchstone for her. She continually went back to it, between tentative forays into her new environment. I finally decided that the only way she would free herself of that cage was if I took it away. She was outside exploring when I collapsed it into its carrying case and put in the back of the closet.

She came in and instantly noticed its absence. I watched, the lump of emotions back in my throat, as she frantically searched for that cage. When she couldn't find it, she went to the toy box and brought me her favorite toy—a squeaky hamburger. We played catch for a long time. When she was spent, she stood in front of me and gave me one of those soul-deep stares, straight in the eye. I could almost hear her say, “So what do I do now?”

Having recently moved in myself and faced the exact same dilemma, I felt qualified to make a suggestion, “It’s your world, kid. Find a new spot. Heck, I don’t care; find more than one if you want.”

In response, she hopped up on the couch, circled a couple of times, settled down and went to sleep. It was the beginning of a life of freedom for Zola. She quickly adapted to this new-found liberation. She took my advice and picked a number of favorite spots: the couch, my bed, the front porch. One day she got really bold and dug

under the fence. I debated about chaining her to keep her in the yard, but couldn't bring myself to do it. She was always home when I returned from work, toy in her mouth, ready to play. I accepted that part of giving her freedom was dealing with my fear of what could happen while she was out exploring the neighborhood.

A few months later, I met the man who was to become my husband. An avid hunter, his home was filled with a wide variety of mounted animals. Zola's first visit resulted in several taxidermy repairs, and I was sure we would never be invited back. He didn't seem like much of a dog person. To my surprise we were both invited back, repeatedly, and she eventually decided fighting with critters that didn't fight back was no fun.

After a whirlwind courtship, we were engaged to be married and Zola had another home, along with some equine siblings. My husband grew as attached to her as I. We spent many hours playing catch and chasing each other around the house—we called it “dog therapy.” I'm sure we wouldn't have survived those busy years without it. We traveled between two homes, living in Alamosa during the week and Creede on the weekends. Zola had free run of both. There were no fences, no chains. Although she explored, she never wandered far from the house. She took on the job of security guard, wearing paths around both homes with her repeated “perimeter checks.” Gradually, her neurotic energy mellowed into a confident exuberance for life, and she wasn't afraid to be touched anymore.

My husband and I developed a passion for packing camping gear into the mountains on our horses, and spending long weekends in the high country with friends and family. Zola loved these trips and enthusiastically supervised preparations, sticking

her shiny, black nose in the packs to make sure we had everything. On the trail, she was our fearless scout, running ahead of the horses to clear the way of danger and explore new territory. She would regularly come back and walk the length of the string, checking on all of us as if she was in charge. We let her think she was.

Once in camp, after having run twice as many miles as the horses had walked, she was ready to play catch with anyone who would throw for her. She also had an obsession about rodents and spent hours digging in their holes, trying to rout the residents. After a short battle of wills with my husband early on, she secured a permanent spot in our tent (next to him). She provided all of us with endless hours of entertainment over the years.

In October, 2004 Zola contracted a mysterious illness that would not respond to antibiotics. She began to have trouble walking, and the vet suspected cancer. There was nothing we could do but try and keep her comfortable. Over several months in a gradual, insidious way, the cancer trapped her in her own body. She cried because she couldn't make it out to the pasture to feed the horses with us anymore. It was heartbreaking to watch our once vibrant dog, struggling to stand. The vet kept her comfortable with pain medication. We carried her a lot. Then, one day, the light went out in her eyes and I knew the time had come to free her of this last prison.

I called the vet and he was kind enough to come to the house and there, on the kitchen floor, we released her. A close friend came to be with me and we held her as the last breath left her broken body.

I know in my heart that she runs free now, and that some day we will play catch again in a meadow filled with wildflowers of colors which defy imagination. She will

always be a symbol of freedom for me—running out in front of the horses, leading the way with her indomitable spirit.

The other day we were cleaning out the garage, and there was the old cage, stuck back behind some boxes. It's been a year since she passed, and suddenly it all comes back to me in a rush of emotion. I miss her. I think about how, in the year since her death, I have been released from so many of my own cages. I see myself trying to crawl back in them to avoid my fear of all this new space in my life. I know there's only one thing to do—throw out the cage and explore this freedom, like Zola would blaze a new trail into unknown wilderness.

