

The Yellow Rope

The two old friends sat on the corner, studying all the action on the street.

Four ears perked forward as they watched Francisco navigate the bumpy road on his old rusty bike, an extension ladder hoisted over his right shoulder and a gallon of paint hanging from the handlebar. I saw the one friend stir but a look from his buddy told him that Francisco was okay.

I saw them both lick their lips as they caught the familiar tune from the ice cream cart, charming at first but now just one of those irritating melodies that you can't get out of your head, as the vendor wound his way through the streets to the private school, hoping to beat the parents to the school gate.

And then something caught their attention. A gringa who was still several blocks away. I saw one nod something to his buddy.

I could imagine what the gesture meant: "If she's got a yellow rope with her – run like hell."

And then I saw the two best friends stand up, sniff each others butts one last time and head off their separate ways: Amarillo and Centro.

Amarillo was the new addition to our family. He was mostly yellow lab with probably half a dozen other breeds mixed in there somewhere, with a scar on his ear where he had come too close to a bicycle he was chasing. At least that's what he told us through the animal whisperer we went to see when we had gotten home last year. Mind you, he had also informed us that he was terrified of being kidnapped and used for stud since he was the best looking dog in La Peñita, so we took everything he

said with a grain of salt. I guess he didn't realize the significance of his 'operation'.

He had the saddest hang-dog look, something he had clearly worked hard on and which had served him well begging for food during the two years he lived on the street.

The one we simply called Centro certainly looked like a purebred Springer Spaniel. We knew he lived down on the main avenida as we saw him locked up there at Christmas and Easter when the crowds got big and the fireworks got loud. He would drop by most days for a visit. Sometimes he would follow us home as we walked from downtown with our groceries. Sometimes he would catch up with us on our morning walk on the beach.

Amarillo and Centro loved to play on the beach. They raced like maniacs in and out of the surf. They chased the pelicans. They flipped head over heel when they fell in a hole that a local has dug to bury themselves in the sand, a practice that still mystifies me after all this time. They played an energetic game of 'Diaper Tag' – don't ask – with some refuse that they found on the beach that we thought at first was simply a plastic bag.

Centro was one of the few lucky ones. He was well fed and had a loving family. And he had the freedom to spend his day at leisure, running on the beach and exploring the streets of the town. I didn't know if he had yet found out about 'the yellow rope'.

★★

I remember the morning well; it was a year earlier. We were walking home from downtown, loaded with groceries. As we turned the corner they were waiting at our door. I recognized Cynthia, who lived across the street, and the other two women were familiar, although I didn't know their names. And I recognized the little dog – skin and bones, dirty, his eyes glazed over and his legs wobbly – as he stood at their side in the middle of the street at the end of a yellow rope.

We had been feeding him for a couple of months, like many other dogs, and I saw the recognition in his eyes. His tail began to wag as we walked down the street towards him.

They were from Jaltemba Bay Animal Rescue, the folks who ran the spay and neuter clinic, and the little dog was just recovering from surgery.

“We need someone to foster him for a couple of weeks,” the pitch began. “We have someone who will fly him back to Vancouver and we hope to find a family up there to adopt him. He's too nice a dog to go back on the street.”

I'm sure they knew Anne from her frequent volunteering at the clinic but I had only been there once and they probably didn't recognize me without a fifty pound muzzled dog in my arms.

We knew they did good work and, besides, it was only for two weeks.

Fat chance. I guess I knew deep down that the die was cast the minute we let him into the house, saw that look that he had perfected and let him climb up on the double bed in between us. In truth, it was probably cast much before that.

Maybe it was the time the neighbours across the street moved out in the middle of the night and left him behind howling in the street which, unfortunately, is an all too common occurrence in Mexico.

Or perhaps it was the night we went to dinner in Guayabitos with some friends and watched in horror out the back window of the colectivo as he chased us down busy Highway 200, dodging motorcycles and beer trucks and pick-ups, until his little legs gave out. As I look back, when we returned home that night and found him sleeping soundly on the dusty street in front of the apartment, it was probably at that point that he had decided that we were parents that were worth adopting.

We called him Amarillo: Amarillo Casa in full. It means yellow house. We named him after the yellow house where he had lived with what we thought had been his previous owners. It turned out later that they were just like us; they had also succumbed to that look of his and had just been feeding him.

Like most street dogs, he had many names. The locals called him 'Narrone'. Our friends, who claim that he saved them from drowning in the estuary one night called him 'Blanco'. The twins around the corner who had fed him all winter the year before called him 'Buddy'. The folks at the spay and neuter clinic refer to him as 'Caesar'. But Amarillo really didn't care what you called him as long as it wasn't 'Late for Dinner.' It's amazing how a dog who used to go two or three days between meals now grows weak and peckish if his dinner is ten minutes late.

Thirty pounds later, it was time to rebook our flights home. His vaccinations were all in order. A kennel had been

purchased. And we had a 'Certificate of Health' from the kindly veterinarian in Bucerias.

"When is your flight? he had asked.

"In two weeks,"

We had watched him scratch his chin and study the calendar.

"Must be within seven days," he had finally said, and then counted back five days from our departure, smiled, and dated the form accordingly.

I know that Air Canada has many good agents but I had had the misfortune to have drawn the agent from hell. But I was calling from Mexico and the temptation to hang up and try again was outweighed by my reluctance to hear "All our agents are busy, please stay on the line to maintain your calling priority" another fifty or so times.

"The weight limit is fifty pounds – dog and kennel," she intoned. "If it weighs one ounce more you will have to leave it in the airport."

I had visions of a pack of overweight terriers foraging their way through Puerto Vallarta Airport looking anxiously for owners who had long since fled the country. Visions of desperate old ladies with a bathroom scale in one hand and a box of Exlax in the other trying to induce Fluffy to poop her way down to the limit before departure time.

"Well maybe he's only forty pounds," I replied, deeply regretting my previous estimate. "I'm just guessing. I haven't actually weighed him."

"So he's lost ten pounds since we've been on the phone?" she replied, much to my amazement.

We decided to fly Delta instead, even though it meant a stopover in Atlanta.

It was a stopover we regretted a week later as we sat on the plane looking anxiously at our watches. We were half an hour late and the connection was extremely tight. I cursed the airline logic that said it made sense to delay this flight to await the arrival of connecting passengers even if it meant that all of us who would be on connecting flights at the other end would be out of luck.

We clutched the little ticket that the stewardess had given us to tell us that 'Fido is on the Plane' and thought of poor Amarillo trembling somewhere down in the noisy bowels of the plane.

I suspect that we arrived in Atlanta, an hour and a half late, at precisely the moment when our connecting flight took off for Toronto. And as we were making our way out through customs and security and then back in through them again, an annoying remnant of 9/11 since we were not even scheduled to leave the airport, I imagined that the last of the stand-by passengers were receiving their boarding passes for the flight on which we had been wait-listed.

Sure enough, by the time we arrived at the gate, our rebooked flight was full. Atlanta Airport is the size of a small city. A half hour later, we had made our way back to the baggage area to claim Amarillo. He was not there

"There is no way that the dog could have mistakenly been put on the flight; it's against FAA Regulations," the harried agent advised us through clenched teeth once we had made our way back to the gate.

“Okay, okay,” he reluctantly replied after much pleading.

We watched him mutter away to himself as he strode to check just to satisfy the two raving Canadians. He was drenched when he returned to report that yes, in fact, Amarillo had been put on the plane by mistake but that he had rescued him and we could indeed now retrieve him at baggage.

It was 4:00 am, eight hours later, when they finally found him. In Toronto. In Customs.

“Is he drugged?” the agent in customs asked as Anne and I huddled over the speaker phone at the luggage desk in Atlanta Airport. “He’s remarkably calm.”

“No,” Anne replied, “he’s just Mexican.”

“Can you take him out for a quick pee?” she added.

“But I need his documentation to let him out of customs.”

“I know this was foolish of us,” Anne replied, rolling her eyes, “but I guess we were operating under the obviously mistaken impression that we and Amarillo would be arriving in Canada on the same day. His leash and all his papers are still here with us in Atlanta.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line.

“Don’t worry. I’ll sneak him out. And I’ll have someone check on him once in a while. Listen. I know you will be anxious to see him tomorrow but he must stay in his kennel until you leave the terminal.”

It was with a mixture of relief and trepidation that we entered the baggage area early the next morning. There he was. In his glory. Spread out on a Delta blanket. He was surrounded by six Delta Stewardesses feeding him Ritz crackers. His skills

had not deserted him. The much practiced look was working its charms.

It was cool when we arrived with patches of snow still on the ground. Amarillo stepped out of the car in his new hand-made coat. He had been the subject of many bemused looks and shaking heads as he had stood in the dressmaker's shop in La Peñita being fitted for his new threads. But I am sure he appreciated its warmth now.

It was a whole new world. The 'sand' was white and cold and wet. The 'lizards' were furry and black and climbed trees. The dogs all had owners and stayed in their own yards rather than wandering around town.

He has learned to 'sing' along with Anne's harmonica playing. It was a lesson we have regretted on occasion. Like when we took him to a concert in the park with a band that featured a harmonica player. Or when he suddenly bursts into song in the back seat of the car when a song with a particularly shrill chorus comes on the radio, something we like to call 'carioki'.

And he even provided me with my fifteen minutes of fame that summer, when the Toronto Star published my entry in their best invented words contest:

"Our dog Amarillo loves to ride in the car. If any door is open – front, back, hatch – he's in the car like a shot; he's 'ambidoorstrous'."

But mostly, he just lies in the yard, soaking up the sun even on the hottest July days. Content with his choice of parents. Until, of course, he sees me down at the dock, tying up the

canoe with a length of yellow rope. Then, it's under the porch
as fast as he can. And they say dogs don't remember.