

TWO

When She Was Young

TEELA WAS BORN AT GUIDE DOGS for the Blind in San Rafael, California, in November 2003, one of a litter of ten puppies, seven of whom graduated from guide dog training to be placed with a blind user. Her father was a Labrador Retriever, reddish-blond in color, her mother a red-blond Golden Retriever. Teela is tall—a Golden Retriever-Labrador cross with short, strawberry blond fur, lively in temperament from the start. Her first eight weeks were spent in the guide dog puppy enclosures, where she was with her littermates and intensively socialized with people and objects of the world with which she would need to be familiar.

A family in Weaverville, California, raised her for her next fourteen months. She was initially a 4-H project of the daughter's, but she was socialized by the parents as well. The mother, an elementary school teacher, took her daily to her classroom; the father, a firefighter, and the son roughhoused with her. Her raisers socialized her according to strict rules for what is expected of a guide dog—habits of obedience, of relieving on schedule, sitting, lying still, and adapting to multiple environments—the home, the stores and offices of Weaverville, going camping and hiking with them.

When she was sixteen months old, Teela returned to the guide dog center to begin her formal training in guide work, which lasted for five additional months. There she learned to wear and pull

smoothly on a harness; move from curb to curb, or point A to point B, as instructed; follow specific commands; find stairs and elevators; know her left from her right; stop at changes in elevation; clear both herself and her follower when moving through doorways and around obstacles like garbage cans, scaffolding, and parked cars; and dutifully show intelligent disobedience when needed—such as when her person might be in danger of stepping off the edge of a railway platform or into oncoming traffic.

When I arrived on the guide dog campus at the start of Teela's sixth month, I had to learn what she already knew. I began a highly disciplined four weeks in residence of doing as I was told—moving my arms and legs with prescribed gestures, using an appropriate tone of voice and select words so that Teela could recognize my wishes and lead me safely. We would walk the sidewalks of San Rafael with a trainer behind us, instructing me on where to turn and where I had erred: "Correct your dog." "Heel her." "Go back. You missed the curb." "She nailed it! Good for Teela!" I would sit in meetings with the often-heard command, "Control your dog!" as Teela nosed over to play with the dog next to her. At the dining table, for three meals a day, I sat with Teela at my feet, nose forward under the table communing with the other dogs—the big round table spaced, pinwheel fashion, with person, dog, person, dog—each dog attached to its user with its leash tucked under the person's left thigh so that a stirring of the dog could be felt. I kept alert for Teela's movements, knowing I might have to settle her at any moment. Sometimes outside while we were practicing our guide work, the trainers would walk by carrying a cat in their arms or extending a piece of food, such as a hot dog, trying to tempt and distract our dogs. I grasped Teela's leash extra tight, knowing I had a highly excitable, easily distracted dog and not wanting to fail the test of being able to control her.

For Teela was, from the start, a strong-willed dog, responsive to her environment, sensitive, easily aroused, interested in everything

around her, eager to get places quickly and perhaps veer off to new ones. She was dutiful in doing as I asked—she knew her left from her right, stopped at curbs, and looked toward me for direction—but always I felt she conveyed a sense that, “if you don’t watch out, I will just take you where I want to go.”

In the training, each of us had to prove we could control our dog and handle the dog expertly so that we would be safe and the dogs would reliably work for us. Since Teela was so high-strung and energetic in the way she pulled me when guiding, I felt I had to do extra work each day to be sure she knew who was in command and in the hope of tiring her a bit before the formal instruction of the day began. I would go out with her every morning before breakfast in the semi-dark, walking the grounds of the guide dog campus, giving her commands, working with her so she would not pull me off course into bushes or grass beside the path as she enthusiastically marched us forward. Some of my most vivid memories from our time in guide dog school are of our walks those early mornings when no one else was around; the sprinklers were on watering the grass; the staff had not yet come in to work at their offices; the sun was rising, the sky glowing a rosy red color above the long arm of a freeway blurry in the distance. I would work with Teela, practicing our drills so she would obey me, respond quickly, not pull my left arm too hard, stop on command, sit beside me, lie down when told, get up, come to me when called. We would do our obedience exercises standing under a street lamp, the light flowing down on us. After completing them, I would reach down and pat Teela’s head, then look up at the gentle glow of the sunrise and hope that our day would work out well.

Early on, in one of our instructional sessions, a trainer made a statement to the class that has stayed with me: “You want your dog to feel that the happiest place to be is by your side.” For Teela’s entire life with me, I have wanted, more than anything, for that to be so. Fortunately, I was given a temperamentally happy dog, so it has not been hard.

But especially in the beginning, I doubted my abilities. From the moment the door to my dorm room was opened and Teela and her leash were handed to me, the question immediately in my mind was, “Will she like me?” It seems strange to wonder if your dog will like you, given that dogs are so often said to give their owners unconditional love. Though my love for her would become unconditional, I always assumed that hers for me would be dependent on how I treated her. “Does she like me?” is a question I still have from time to time, though I know from the way she rests her head in my lap, her eager attentiveness, or her happy appreciation when I do something she likes, that by now I think she does. In the beginning, however, I had no such confidence. I was simply overwhelmed with the size of the dog, her forceful exuberance, her strength, and the task ahead of us—to move through the world with ease, to move safely, to have her within my control, to find our way together.

When I was given Teela, I was also given information about her puppy raisers. During our training and continuing well after we graduated and I brought her home, I kept thinking that Teela must be missing the family who raised her. It was a long time before I would feel that she was truly content to be with me, that this was now where she belonged.

When I first arrived at the school, we were taught by practicing with a harness wrapped around a towel, and by being led by a trainer rather than a dog. Three days later when Teela was given to me, she moved out of the kennels, where she had been living in a dog run, and into a dormitory room with me. She slept on the floor beside me on a fleece pad, ate when I fed her, walked the streets of San Rafael with me, sat with me in instructional sessions and at meals—almost all of the time, except for brief play periods, attached to me by a five-foot leather leash. The leash was usually doubled over—making the distance between us no more than two and-a-half feet—one end attached to her collar, the other held securely in my hand. This closeness, I felt, was a model for how we always ought to be.

I used to stand each day in the area outside the back door of the dormitory accompanying Teela, in the early morning dark, as she relieved herself at the far end of the leash, waiting for the deed to be done, and, in the very beginning, for one of the staff to come over and clean up after her. This was before they taught us how to do it—how to scoop for your dog without seeing by following the leash toward her and feeling the shape of her body. I would stand and wait and look over at Teela's golden, strawberry blond fur glowing in the semi-darkness, and I would think, "It must be magnificent to see her run." Since that time, I have seen Teela run many times, and it always is magnificent, even now when she is older and her strong front legs are doing most of the work so she is slightly more bent on the run, less fully stretched out while loping. Because my vision is limited, I see Teela incompletely as she runs and she easily merges away into the background of a field or beach, but I can see the sunlight glinting off her moving shape and I know that she is happy.

The month of my residence in guide dog school was a kind of cauldron. It melded Teela and me together and gave me rules to follow—instructions for how to handle my dog and myself from which I was not supposed to deviate. I have religiously followed those instructions over the years with but one major deviation: I play Frisbee with Teela. It is something I can do with her out in the open, and, because she is a dutiful retriever, she will always come back to me. She gets her exercise and we both enjoy it. The advice in our training was never to play ball or Frisbee with your dog because the dog may then chase those objects when tossed by other people, carrying you in tow. I have never had Teela chase someone else's Frisbee. We do not come across them very often, and hers is a floppy nylon Frisbee made for dogs, not the kind people usually throw to one another. We are generally careful, and so it has worked out for us. Still, I often feel illicit when playing Frisbee with Teela, as if we are in a guide dog no-man's land. When we are done and I

put Teela's harness back on her, immediately all is safe again. But it always seems to me worth the risk, including the risk of my tossing the Frisbee accidentally over a wall or high in the branches of a tree as Teela circles and circles in search of it. The Frisbee may be lost, but Teela comes back, if only to ask me where to go to find it. When I first tossed a Frisbee to Teela and saw her run, I was so very proud that this beautiful, massive dog was mine.

When I brought Teela home from our training, I kept her attached to me with her leash for the first two weeks as we walked around our house. Often I hooked it around my belt loop. Where I went, she went. When I sat at my desk, she lay at my feet. When I was in the kitchen cooking or cutting bread, she was by my side. Only later was I willing to let her walk around our home without me—though, in fact, she continued to follow me closely and has dogged my steps ever since. Over time, she has become willing to lie in another room without me, but she has always been alert to where I am, as I am to her presence. When I stir, she stirs. When I move into another room, she gets up and follows me.

One of the first things she did upon coming home was to take our poodle's soft toys—a teddy bear and odd animals made for dogs—and chew them carefully, using her pointed side teeth to take out the stitches so she could get at the stuffing and eat it. I had to teach her not to take those toys, nor the small catnip figures of mice and fish that constantly move around the floor of our house when our cats play with them. Teela surprised me by being willing to avoid these toys. She has the dutifulness of a Lab. She tends to learn and train easily, except when it is something she really does not want to do, like coming when called rather than following her nose when out in a field. I tend to think that Teela's Golden Retriever part is her "party girl" self—the one that likes to play and run off, greet people excitedly, and generally have a good time—while her Labrador Retriever is her "dutiful" self—the dog who sticks by my side, obeys me, looks to me constantly for permission.

When Teela first came home with me, our house felt very small. She was a seventy-pound dog at mid-cabinet height. I was used to a twenty-pound poodle lower to the ground and to three cats down around my ankles. Our house is long and narrow with relatively small rooms that were immediately filled up with Teela's solid presence. The motion on the floors—the milling about that I was used to—suddenly became dense. In the present, I cannot imagine our house without Teela. It would feel empty. But back then, it was a new experience to have the company of such a large dog.

At first, our poodle, Esperanza, ignored her. She would run around Teela to greet me or walk under her. When I attempted to play with both dogs down in our basement, each dog would play only with me. Esperanza brought me her toy; Teela brought me hers. After several weeks of responding to them separately, I gave up and told them they would have to play with each other. They did that for a time, but never for long. Teela is deferential, and Esperanza will simply steal Teela's toy from her and run away with it. They have each kept their own space over the years, though they do often lie close to each other. My hope is that the fact of each other's presence makes them feel they have the comfort of canine company.

When I first came home with Teela, I had to learn how to navigate the back stairs of our house with her. These are narrow, steep, indoor stairs with not much room for the two of us. Because I am often afraid on stairs, I soon began practicing on these to develop my skills. Teela's puppy raisers—whom I met at our graduation—had told me they had taught her that she could sometimes go down stairs slowly. I was grateful for that and worked at slowing her down, though the slower pace on stairs has remained an incompletely accomplished task for us. Her raisers also said they sometimes deliberately stepped on Teela in their house so that she would be prepared for a blind person not seeing her and tripping over her. This gave me comfort when I stepped on her occasionally as she lay on the hallway floor

near our kitchen. Her reflexes, from the start, have been so quick that she often jumps up and moves away just in time before I trip over her. Her tendency to do this hurts my feelings sometimes because she will spring to her feet when I get near her even when I know she is there and will not step on her. I often cannot tell if she thinks I will step on her or if she simply wants to show herself ready to go where I go next.

From the start when she and I went out, I was extremely happy because Teela has a brisk pace and smooth gait. When walking with her, I felt as if flying. I could look up at the sky. I felt free following my dog! No longer did I have to drag a cane along the sidewalk, making my right shoulder sore. No more exhaustion from long walks swinging the cane left to right. This dog—this new mobility device—could carry her own weight, take me places, make me proud. I felt I was a member of a special class—one of few people, perhaps only ten thousand in North America, who can be constantly accompanied by a guide dog. The analogy of a horse was very much in my mind, because Teela was big and wore leather, and I was attached to her, following her but as if riding her—her strength, her determination, pulling me forward, taking me places quickly. I saddled her up with the harness and we were off. I was akin to a cowboy—a cowgirl—not on the range, but suddenly adventurous, in the open air, natural, just having ridden in from the plains. I wasn't some sort of artificial person, closed in, making my way with small steps. I was a big person, a nature person, a woman who handled leather gear, a country girl in the city—someone out of the ordinary, here with my guide. I was no longer simply a blind woman walking alone—a handicapped woman who counted for less or needed help. I was a competent person not reduced to the trivialities of life. I got the big picture, I stood astride the world. It was now mine. I wasn't walking through it so much as sailing upon it.