

Passion Emerges from the Ashes of Grief
By Marilou Chanrasmi

Our 11-year old collie/shepherd mix, Shen, is in surgery at the University of Minnesota's small animal hospital. An ultrasound confirms that Shen has a mass in her spleen. The doctors suspect cancer. I am thrown into the hellish vortex of cancer. The only way we can confirm cancer, and the extent of how far it has spread, is through surgery. No guarantees. In fact, I am told, "She's dying. Any surgery would be palliative. You may get a couple more weeks with her, maybe three, if you're lucky." My head is spinning; my heart is burning. I am not ready to say goodbye. Just days ago she was acting like her usual self. Today, life has been drained from her like a tornado ripping through a town, demolishing and flattening what was once a living, breathing community. Today, there's heaviness in my heart - an all-consuming tightness. It's as if tentacles of an octopus have latched onto my heart, with their suction cups working tirelessly to drain the remaining life out of me.

I prepare to say goodbye to a family member, to a spiritual companion, to my best friend. I opt for surgery. The vet assures me she is not suffering. If we discover the cancer has spread, we can make the decision to humanely let her go while she is still "sleeping."

I pace the hallways - waiting and hoping. Outside the hospital - it's sunny and feels like spring. Is today the day? Is the sun shining brightly in preparation for welcoming Shen into heaven? I pray for strength, wisdom and courage to do what is best for Shen, not what's easy or comforting to me.

The doctor comes out. She's wearing blue scrubs; her face carrying a somber look. With empathy, she says, "The cancer has spread. Shen is losing a lot of blood. We have done one blood transfusion. She is stable now. We need to remove a large tumor that has formed in and around her liver." Since it will be awhile, the vet recommends we go home. They will call when the surgery is over and we can come back to visit her.

It's been a long day. We heed the vet's advice and head home to wait for news with our other dog Shadow, an 11 year old 36 pound black lab mix, whom I rescued from the country roads of Owasso, Oklahoma nine years ago - a survivor of a gun shot wound

to his head. By now, Shadow is most likely having a serious panic attack from being left alone. He has known Shen since the day he joined our family one hot summer day nine years ago. Together they have shared adventures, dog beds, car rides, and much to my dismay, an occasional escape from our fenced-in yard, via a dog-made underground tunnel, as they explored the backyards of neighbors' homes before being "captured"; or, in Shadow's case, he waits for me with his front paws on the back bumper of my orange Honda element, as I'm tearing around the corner, running down our alley, frantically searching and screaming out their names.



I swear I see a smirk on his face as I hear the words, "Where have you been? I've been waiting for you to come home! Did you find Shen? She couldn't keep up with me so I had to ditch her!" Fortunately, my partner who was driving around in her vehicle caught sight of Shen a few blocks away – as soon as she saw my partner, she came flying down the alley, like a gazelle, and went flying into the safety and warmth of the Honda CRV.

The phone rings. Our caller ID indicates it's the University of Minnesota vet school. It's way too soon for them to be calling. "Is this Marilou?" the voice on the other end asks. "Yes." I'm afraid to ask any questions, to say anything more. "Shen's condition is far worse than we anticipated. The cancer has spread. She's losing blood. We need your permission to do another blood transfusion." At that moment, in my head, someone hit the pause button on the DVD player. The frame freezes: "she's losing blood; we need your permission.... She's losing blood, we need your permission" plays over and over again. In the background, the rhythmic, powerful beats of bachi sticks on taiko drums, vibrate and beat the message, "It's time Marilou. It's time."

I return to the phone conversation. With sadness and acceptance, I say, "No more transfusions. It's time to let her go."

I make it back to the University of Minnesota in time to hold her, as her spirit, wrapped in mine, is set free. I wrap my hands around Shen's paw as the doctor inserts the needle into her vein. There's a deep sadness in my heart, yet a sense of relief for her.

Her chest rises, and she takes one last breath. I close my eyes and breathe in her spirit, as tears of denial and acceptance, roll down my cheeks.

In the weeks that follow, I immerse myself in ways to relieve myself of the pain in my heart. I cry in the arms of my partner. I hold Shadow. I take walks with Shadow, feeling Shen's presence in the wind that blows gently on my face. I write. I doodle. I make home movies of Shen. I share my grief with friends. As days pass, the tentacles holding my heart hostage loosen their grip, one suction cup at a time, till one day I innocently search Petfinder. Shen's spirit guides me to a dog rescued by Pet Haven, a foster-based animal rescue. Not quite ready to adopt, we offer to foster.

In search of an outlet for the floodgates of grief, I throw myself into volunteering and helping the homeless, abused and abandoned dogs. I begin by fostering Missy, a 2 year old lab/pit/rottweiler mix, only to "fail" [*In the animal rescue world, the term "foster failure" is an affectionate term for someone who ends up adopting the dog they*



are fostering] within hours. Next, as an intake phone volunteer, I return calls from people finding strays, or surrendering their own dogs for one reason or another. In a month I move into the role of Volunteer Director. Seven months later, with surprise and gratitude, I am asked to take on the role of President of a 55 year old animal rescue organization.

The pain of losing Shen pushed me forward to live my passion. I had always wanted to do something with animals. I guess I didn't know how to "make it happen", or maybe I was too afraid to follow my heart. What emerged from Shen's ashes, was a new Marilou. Out of the ashes and tears came conviction and passion to be a voice for the animals. Out of the ashes came defiance for standing on the sidelines of life.

I found myself, and I found purpose by volunteering for a cause I believe in. As I held Shen in my arms, the afternoon of September 15th, 2006, unbeknownst to me, I was on stage – the prologue - for a play that was yet to unfold. Of the many possible roads leading from grief, she led me to the following:

“Spirit of Shen -
Finding your voice,
Living your passion,
Transforming the world.”



Marilou is currently serving as President of Pet Haven. Marilou embraces creativity and passion through writing and storytelling. By day she is an Academic Program Manager for a software company and shares her home in St. Paul, Minnesota with her partner, their two rescued dogs and one cat, all adopted through Pet Haven. She has been volunteering with Pet Haven since October, 2006.