

Finding Peace in a Dog Named Cheeseburger

An inspiring story about a homeless man, his dog named Cheeseburger and how they helped one woman on a hot August day.

I couldn't put my finger on why, exactly, but I had been feeling far away from God lately, like he wasn't really hearing me.

A case of the spiritual blues, I guess.

The sweltering heat didn't help—August here in Georgia can get pretty unbearable. It was 100 degrees today, and really sticky. I turned up the air conditioner in my car full blast, ready to head home from my errands.

That's when I saw the dog.

He lay on top of a lumpy Army-green duffel bag right on the walk outside Applebee's restaurant. No shade. Sleeping, or at least I hoped he was. Why, he could be dead in this heat!

I pulled in and found a parking spot then I hurried over to the dog. I bent down. "Hi, fella. You thirsty?"

I love dogs and they like me. But this one—he was medium-sized, black, graying around the muzzle—opened one eye, then shut it and turned his head away from me. Deliberately. His tail didn't budge.

He had a collar, and by the way he was guarding the duffel bag, I figured he was waiting for his owner, who was no doubt sitting inside the restaurant in air-conditioned comfort!

I stormed into Applebee's, ready to do battle. Right away, I spotted the owner. He sat alone at the counter, a tall glass of iced tea in front of him. Longish wavy blond hair and a goatee.

Thin, like he didn't always get enough to eat. He was wearing jeans that had seen better days, but they were clean, though his hands had what could have been faint paint stains. He seemed to sense me coming and turned on the stool to face me.

"That your dog?" I demanded.

"Yes, ma'am, he is."

“He’s in the sun and has no water. I imagine he’s hungry too.” I must have raised my voice because some people stared at me. “Dogs like me, but he wouldn’t even open both eyes when I spoke to him.”

The man broke into a slow, easy grin. He slid off the stool. “That’s because he hasn’t been properly introduced to you. Come on. I’ll do the honours.”

Introduced? I followed him outside.

He squatted down next to the dog, who sat up and fastened his eyes onto his owner. His tail came alive.

“Ma’am, I don’t know your name.”

“Marion.” I bent close to them.

“Marion, I’d like you to meet Cheeseburger. Cheeseburger, this nice lady is Marion.” The dog looked right into my eyes and offered a paw.

I took it. “Hi, Cheeseburger,” I said.

He licked my hand and his tail shifted into high gear.

“And I’m Johnny,” the man said.

“Johnny, I’m afraid he’s thirsty.”

“Oh, he’s okay,” he said. “This spot was shady when I left him here just a few minutes ago.” Johnny picked up his duffel bag. “We’ve been together for nine years. See, his collar has my cell phone number on it, and he’s been vaccinated.”

Johnny moved his bag beneath a Japanese maple tree and Cheeseburger settled down there beside it, in the shade. “How far do you live from here?” I asked.

“Not far,” he said. “Back in those woods across the street. We have a good tent.”

“But couldn’t you go to a shelter?”

“They won’t take Cheeseburger, and I don’t go anywhere without him,” he said.

Each time he said Cheeseburger, the dog’s tail flopped back and forth joyfully.

“Johnny, I’m not going to be able to drive off without first getting Cheeseburger some food and water,” I said. “It’s not you. It’s just, well, I have this thing about dogs...”

“Okeydoke, if it’ll make you happy,” he said. “I’m going back in now and finish up my drink. It was nice to meet you, Marion.”

I zipped into Walgreen’s and came back with a bowl, a big bottle of cold water, a small sack of dog food and a bone. Then I went in and fetched Johnny from the restaurant. “I thought you should be with me when I give the food and water to Cheeseburger,” I told him.

“Okeydoke,” he said. Cheeseburger stood as Johnny and I approached. I set the food down and he nibbled at it—mostly to be polite, I think. He did lap up quite a lot of water.

“I guess he was thirsty,” Johnny said. “Thanks. I’m not going to start giving him bottled water, but don’t worry, I take really good care of him.”

“And who takes care of you?” The words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them, and I knew they sounded sharper than I intended.

Johnny didn’t seem to mind. “Here’s the way it works,” he said gently. “Every morning me and Cheeseburger step out of our tent and look up at the sky. And I say, ‘Lord, we belong to you. We trust you. Take care of us another day. Thank you.’ And then at night when we lie down to sleep, I look out at the stars and say, ‘We still trust you, God.’” He smiled again—that slow, easy grin.

I smiled back. There was just something about his eyes I liked. “Maybe I’ll see you and Cheeseburger again sometime,” I said.

“Okeydoke. Me and Cheeseburger come here or head over to McDonald’s most mornings. Then we walk down toward the post office. I’m a painter by trade, hoping to find some work.”

There was a genuine peace about Johnny, even in the face of my unkind accusations.

I fished around in my purse and found a twenty. “Could I give you this?” I asked hesitantly, not certain how to go about it.

He didn’t reach for the bill, just kept looking at me with that contented expression. “You don’t have to. We’re doing pretty good.”

“I’d like to. Very much.”

“Then I thank you, Marion. God bless you.”

I got back in my car and turned on the air conditioner. At the red light, I leaned forward and gazed up into the blue cloudless sky. “Lord, I belong to you. I trust you. Take care of me today. Thank you.”

The light changed. I pulled out onto the highway, feeling refreshed, not so much by the cool air but by an unmistakable peace, the same peace I had seen in Johnny's eyes.