

The Man Who Wanted a Dog

There was nothing special about him. He wasn't very old yet, but he wasn't still young. He had no wife or kids. He lived in an apartment that had a dumpy little yard. He had a job, but not a very good one. He liked to watch TV and eat macaroni and cheese. There wasn't really anything he needed or wanted, except a dog.

He really wanted a dog, because one night, while he was watching TV and eating macaroni and cheese, a car skidded to a stop in front of his apartment. Actually, it stopped in front of his yard, which was next to his apartment. He heard the driver run through the yard and scramble, slamming and banging, over the gate into his back patio, and over the fence. He heard the siren of a police car stop in front of his yard too, and then a cop was in his back patio, trying to find the man who jumped over the fence. It was very exciting. The cops went away and he finished his macaroni and cheese.

This event made the man think that he ought to do something to protect himself from getting barged in on. Besides, he was lonely and he knew it.

He decided to get a dog. But he didn't do anything about it. He wasn't the kind of man that actually did anything about things. So for a while, things went on as before, except for this general idea about a dog.

One day, he heard from a friend that some people were looking for a home for their dog because they couldn't keep it. So he told his friend to tell the people to bring it over. They came in a pickup truck. In the back was his dog, chained to a spare tire. She had a small steel bowl with some residual scrambled eggs, and a squeaky toy shaped like a running shoe. He named her Shasta.

The man and Shasta became friends right away. She was young, only about a year old, and she chewed up things. This made him only a little mad, because he didn't really own anything that couldn't use a good chewing. He took her to obedience class, but not for long, because he saw that as time went by, and with a little patience, she just knew how to live with him and be his dog. He didn't have to give her commands. If they went out in the yard, he just said "OK, time to go back inside," and she did. When they got in the little blue car, she'd jump in his seat. He'd say, "Get over in your seat," and she did.

Shasta was a lovable dog, and the man loved her very much. As the years went by, she kept him company through many long nights of darkness, cold rain and wind. She was very cute, and he met pretty girls when he walked her, because they wanted to pet Shasta. But he didn't do anything about the girls; he said "Yep, she's my buddy," and walked on. She slept on his bed, near his feet, and she always knew when he was feeling down and worried, and couldn't fall asleep. She would crawl up close to him, and he would put out his hand, and she would put her paw in it.

The years went by, as years do. The dog got older and slower and slept on a folded quilt on the floor beside his bed. They went lots of places together. They didn't have everything, but the man didn't do anything about that, because they had everything they needed. But one night, he saw her laying by the screen door, looking out at the yard. He knew that she could see time passing by and loneliness coming in it, which no dog is supposed to mention.

He knew he had to do something, before it was too late. So late that night, after Shasta was asleep, he slipped to the floor on the other side of the bed, and got on his knees.

"God," the man said, "I love this little dog, I truly do. I guess I know the deal. I have to let her go, and it's going to break my heart. That's what I pay for having all these years of her. Then I can have another dog, and go through the same thing, and then again another dog maybe. And when I die, I'll see them again in Heaven. Right? Well, tell you what. I don't want another dog. This one is perfect, and I'm grateful, and I just want Shasta. Just let her be my dog for my lifetime, OK? Do this for me, and I'll do anything you want. And I won't ask for anything else."

The next morning, he woke up and Shasta jumped on the bed with a ball in her mouth, and she jumped to the floor and back on the bed and ran and grabbed one of his shoes and dragged it over by the door, then the other. He was amazed. His dog was one year old again, like when he first got her. She was helping him get ready to go out for a walk. He looked up at the cottage cheese lumps of his apartment's ceiling and thanked God, and then he took Shasta to the park.

Later that day, he saw a flier outside the supermarket, calling for volunteers at the animal shelter. He went and volunteered. Four nights a week he washed pens and walked dogs, helped people adopt them and held them as they died.

Years passed again, and the man was middle aged. He heard rumors of coming layoffs at work, but he didn't ask God for help. He lost his job and struggled to find another. He got a bladder disorder and endured it, taking his pills but leaving God alone. He lived alone with Shasta and never asked God to help him find a wife.

One night, Shasta was laying by the door, looking out at passing time and the loneliness that lives in it, quietly waiting for the sun to set. And the next morning, she was bouncing around as good as new, ready for another fifteen years. So she sat with the man and let him rub her head when his parents died, one and the other, and he made the arrangements and took Shasta on her leash to the cemetery. He never asked God to save them or spare them over another year or cure their cancer or heart disease.

Shasta became a young dog again when the man started slowing down himself. It's not easy getting older. She ran ahead through the cold dew of each morning, sniffing around park benches, swing sets, sand boxes and garbage cans. She waited for him to catch up, which he always did, as the years went by and he retired. It seemed to him that the world got a little colder every winter and even summers didn't get warm enough. His hearing got bad. It was hard to tell if he whistled loud enough to call her from the yard, except that she always came when he did.

Then he was eighty five, recovering from surgery for prostate cancer, taking so many pills all the time. One night, he got up from his chair to go to the bathroom, dreading the pain that waited there. He looked and saw Shasta by the door, staring out at the loneliness that comes in the time that goes on, though she never said anything about that.

She got up and crossed the living room and sat watching him, coming back down the hall from the bathroom. He sat in his chair and looked at her, called her Good Doggie, and died of a stroke. There was a blood clot from the surgery. He didn't feel a thing.

When the man crossed the bridge into heaven, Shasta wasn't there. He didn't understand. So many others were met by dogs and cats, horses, birds. So many reunions. He sat in a park by the gate and waited, haunted by the only one he couldn't let go. The dew on the grass meant she was coming someday. Of course she was.

He decided to wait. He was weary and needed to rest a while. He would close his eyes just a moment and she would catch up soon. When he opened his eyes, God willing, she would be asleep at his feet, as always.



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