

A Dog Gone Good Story

They sat on a bus bench at the edge of the park, old and young. The old man smiled at his dog. It had the head, body, and coloring of a Labrador but the beard, chops, and chest hair of a Schnauzer. It lay happily and obediently on a leash that drooped next to the bench. The sun cast a shadow across the man's feet, where the leash looped twice over his cracked leather shoes. The man's timeworn wool pants were plaid and faded, predating four presidents. He was well into his seventies and held the dog's leash loosely, showing confidence the dog would never run from him.

Edward was easily fifty years younger than the man next to him. He paused the music on his phone though didn't remove his headphones. He looked down at the lightly panting dog and said, "Is it cool if I pet your dog? He doesn't bite or anything, right?"

The old man craned his neck with a look of disapproval. He rubbed his bald head with his left hand, causing the liver marks on his face to dance. "Let me tell you a joke," he replied.

Edward shuffled uncomfortably on the bench, immediately regretting his choice to ask. He looked down at the dog. Its curious face smiled one of those open mouthed, tongue-out dog grins. Edward hadn't answered Mr. Cuthbert before the elderly man spoke again. "This guy walks over to a man at a park. He likes the man's dog, see. The guy asks him if his dog bites." Mr. Cuthbert quit talking and looked at Edward, waiting expectantly. The old man didn't continue his story until Edward looked at him, straight in the eyes. "He asks the man if his dog bites. The man says to the guy, 'No.' So the guy reaches over and pets this dog, all big and black and shaggy."

Mr. Cuthbert cleared his throat while patting the dog's head with the same hand that gingerly held the leash. "The dog bites the hell outta 'im. Bites the guy, see."

With that said, Mr. Cuthbert laughed a deep laugh that caused him to cough up a little phlegm. "So then the guy cradles his bleeding hand and yells at the man 'I thought you said your dog doesn't bite!'" Mr. Cuthbert smiled. "The man doesn't even look at the guy and replies 'that's not my dog.'"

Mr. Cuthbert laughed again, perhaps a little harder than before. The giggles brought explosions of phlegm that startled the dog. It stood cautiously, moving slightly away from the old man. The dog's golden eyes gave Edward a look, expressive but indiscernible to him.

Edward didn't laugh. He smirked and looked back at his phone. "I was just asking," he mumbled.

"Pet him," the old man said. He put a hand on Edward's shoulder and then tussled Edward's unkempt hair, like a person used to do to kids back in the 1950s.

Edward looked at the man and then the dog. "No, it's cool. I'm good."

Mr. Cuthbert scoffed. "What's that even mean? I'm good? Like you're some kind of priest on a mission to save the heathen? The sinners on a bus bench?" He laughed and tussled Edward's hair again. "Don't be a sissy, just pet 'im. His name is Charlie."

Edward decided it was less of a hassle to pet the dog than argue. He reached over and summoned the dog. Charlie stood up and went to him without hesitation. Charlie wagged his tail, and Edward ran his hands around the dog's head and body. Edward's bracelets knocked against each other and against the dog, though it didn't seem to bother Charlie.

“You see? Isn’t that better? I bet now you’re good.” Mr. Cuthbert giggled, revealing a habit of laughing at his own jokes. “You know who’s good? Charlie. He’s an awesome dog. That’s what you all say, right? Awesome? Everything is awesome?”

Mr. Cuthbert chuckled and called Charlie over to him. Charlie obeyed and received an ear rub in return. Edward went back to his phone but not soon enough.

“Let me tell you about Charlie,” Mr. Cuthbert said as he placed his hand on Edward’s bracelet laden arm, stopping him from looking at his phone. “I was in a dark place a few years ago. Alone. No one, I mean, no one cared about me.” Mr. Cuthbert wasn’t smiling and looked over at Edward, who was quick to pay attention, looking the old man in the eyes.

“I had no money and no family that cared, you see. I was living in Weleetka, Oklahoma. Ever heard of it?” he asked. Edward shook his head that he hadn’t. “Of course, you haven’t. You probably couldn’t point out Oklahoma on a map much less know where a town of a thousand people would be. It’s right next to Okemah,” at his joke Mr. Cuthbert regained his laugh and smile.

He patted Charlie on the head. The dog laid down completely at his feet and panted a bit even though the temperature was moderate. A few people walked by on the sidewalk. A kid with a red hat took an interest in Charlie until Mr. Cuthbert frowned at him. “Anyway, I lived in that tiny old town and really had nothing going for me. I had a friend, Sax, Mr. Saxton to you, and he and I started this bingo racket. We’re not mean or criminals or anything, we were just bored as hell and tired of no one visiting us, you see?” Mr. Cuthbert looked over at Edward, maintaining eye contact.

“We started going around in Sax’s old Ford EXP. You ever heard of an EXP? Nah, of course, you haven’t.” Mr. Cuthbert looked over disappointingly at Edward. “You even drive? I guess that’s a stupid question for someone that’s sitting at a bus bench. What am I thinkin’?”

Edward shuffled his feet a little. “I drive, sometimes.”

“People crazy, most like,” Mr. Cuthbert said with a hoot. He looked at Edward and frowned. “You need to learn to laugh a little, young man. How are you going to make it to be old and bitter like me?” He cackled again; Edward did not. “Jesus, kid, seriously. You never heard about the sunny side of life?”

Edward laughed, more to placate Mr. Cuthbert than because he found any of the last few minutes amusing. “I just love dogs,” he managed to say.

“Right, well, I don’t see what that has to do with not laughing at anything, but let me tell you the rest of Charlie’s story. So I was alone and poor, poor like you, with holes in my jeans and everything.” Mr. Cuthbert said with smile and a pause, staring at Edward’s ripped jeans. “Sax and I came up with this idea to go around offering bingo to all the old farts like us. We charged twenty dollars per person and promised a payout of eighty percent of the pot. It started off slow, but man did it take off. That reminds me, do you know how you get a sweet little old lady to say the F word?”

Edward shook his head but answered, “Step on her toe?”

“What?” said Mr. Cuthbert with confusion. “God, what’s wrong with you, son? Why would you step on someone’s toe? That’s where your mind goes? Jesus.” Mr. Cuthbert looked out over the street at shops and small offices lining the opposite side of the two-lane road. “Right, well, the question was how do you get a little old lady to say the F word? The answer is that you

get another sweet little old lady to yell 'BINGO!'" Mr. Cuthbert snickered and Edward smiled, trying to be genuine.

"Anyway, back to Pax and me. Pretty soon we had enough money to rent out a ballroom here or conference room there. Nice places, too, like the Holiday Inn. The whole operation grew and grew. We went all over the place, to Fort Smith, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma City—all the way up to Bartlesville, you see. People loved it! Bingo, not Bartlesville. No one loves Bartlesville." Another chuckle. "Let me tell you, there are a lot of bored old people out there. Some of 'em are bitter as hell and more than willing to gamble away their kid's inheritance. Serves 'em right, too, ungrateful brats. Get what I'm saying here, kid?"

Edward nodded. "I think my grandma likes to play bingo."

"That so? She live around here or in Oklahoma?" Mr. Cuthbert's smile pushed his wrinkles up into pinches around his eyes, causing them to look beady and small.

"No, she lives in Minnesota."

"Minnesota? God, what for? Too cold and lots of those people speak funny. Anyway, our operation grew. After a while, we picked up a new partner and called him Shemp. You probably don't even get the reference. Shemp brought a new flavor to our game, see. What we did is that we started rigging the game. Ol' Shemp would show up at our large bingo games. He'd have a whole set of cards, sit off on the side or in the back. We used a cage with a bunch of balls but we weighted the balls to make certain ones more likely. See what's going on here?"

Edward smiled. "Yeah, you're cheating. I get it." Charlie rose and stretched in classic dog fashion, spreading his legs and arching his back. Edward looked up to check the bus schedule on

the sign mounted on the nearby post. Once again, he regretted starting this dialogue though the regret had diminished somewhat, if he was honest with himself.

“Cheating? Its gambling, son, and we were rigging it. Anyway, for the small crowds, we were clearing twenty percent of every pot. For the big crowds, by God, we’d bring in around ninety percent or more because old Shemp would win, you see?”

A lady in her mid-forties tripped on a large stone near the edge of the walkway. She carried a canvas garment bag and set it across the bench next to Edward. Her actions interrupted Mr. Cuthbert’s story, and he waited for her to sit. She was tall and obese. It would have been a tight fit on the bench with the two men, neither of whom offered his seat to her. She stood in bright blue pants that clashed with a red flowing shirt covering her girth. Mr. Cuthbert looked at Edward and shrugged. Edward was certain Mr. Cuthbert had something to say—something he would think was funny and Edward would think was questionable.

“So we were getting a lot of money, at least for three boys from towns you’ve never heard of in Oklahoma. Which for you, I guess, is all of them,” he giggled. “Up until the police caught on.” Mr. Cuthbert stared suspiciously at the large woman before continuing. “It was years ago, of course, and the police figured us out.” He looked again at the woman to ensure she was either not listening or understood that this was a story in the distant past. “To this day, I’m not sure how but they arrested old Shemp and Sax. I got away by the skin of my teeth, but I figured I could never return to my home in Weleetka. It was a dump anyway, not much more than two shacks duct taped together.”

Edward smiled as the bus arrived. The brakes squeaked, and the big lady grabbed her bag to be first in line to its unopened doors. “Nice meeting you,” Edward said to Mr. Cuthbert.

“Hell, you didn’t even introduce yourself so how can you say we met? And I didn’t even get to the part about Charlie and the fight he had with this brown bear in Ouachita National Forest. Anyway, I get it, no one cares. Get on your bus and be gone.” Mr. Cuthbert waved his hand dismissively at Edward. He looked down at Charlie and patted him on the head. Charlie stood up and moved behind the large woman, sniffing at her privates. Mr. Cuthbert made no effort to stop him. Edward stood and tried to distract Charlie with some vigorous petting, but there was no dissuading Charlie.

“A bear fight? This dog?” Edward asked while hoping the lady wouldn’t turn around from the dog nose in the back of her legs.

“Guess you’ll never know, eh? Get on and get out, as they say.” Mr. Cuthbert gave him a half smile and waved goodbye.

Edward wasn’t sure why but he sat down on the bench next to Mr. Cuthbert, a little closer than previously. The lady got on the bus, and Charlie took a seat next to the bench, an arm’s length from Mr. Cuthbert.

“Ha. There’s no bear story. You really think this dog could fight a bear?”

Edward shrugged his shoulders. “I just want to hear how you found Charlie.”

“Charlie found me. I couldn’t go back home. Sax was in prison, or jail, whatever, and his car was impounded. Sax had most of the money. What little I had, I’d stored away in a suitcase in the shed behind my house. Screwed, you see? Anyway, I took a Greyhound from Elk City, that’s a real place, to Summerville, Georgia.”

“What state is that in? Elk City?” Edward asked.

“Oklahoma, son, Oklahoma, but glad you’re asking questions. So I had a brother there, in Summerville, not Elk City, and hoped he might help me out. Turns out he died four years earlier, and his no good family didn’t even try to find me and tell me.” Mr. Cuthbert looked to Edward to assess whether he was properly outraged or not. Satisfied, he continued. “I stayed there for three days. First night I stayed in a motel, probably the worst thing you’ve ever seen, even with your torn jeans and dirty hair.” Edward didn’t say anything to Mr. Cuthbert’s comment, but it made him self-conscious enough that he ran his hands through his hair.

“The second night money was low so I slept on a park bench. It was a park not too different from this one but a bit smaller. The cops didn’t bother me any because it was a small town. In places like that the cops have other concerns and don’t go snooping around parks. The third night, a guy about your age saw me laying out and offered to let me stay at his place. Next day, I moved on.”

Charlie stood and started to pull slightly on the leash. Mr. Cuthbert looked down at him and tugged the leash with a slightly firmer grip. “What’s gotten into you, boy?” he asked the dog. The dog shook its body as though wet; even after he stopped the shaggy hair at its belly vibrated a few seconds longer.

“Maybe he wants to walk?” Edward suggested and held his hand out for the leash.

Mr. Cuthbert smiled, showing a missing tooth. “Well, maybe so. Guess I should hurry this story up. Come, let’s walk a bit and I’ll finish it up.” He handed the leash to Edward and stood in slow increments. He bent forward and leaned himself into a bent position like he would touch his toes. He straightened his back, lifted himself, and took a step away from the bench. “Ahhh,”

he said, “tell you what, walk him over to the edge over there and back. What do you say?” With that, Mr. Cuthbert sat back down on the bench.

Edward walked the dog and allowed Charlie to stop whenever he wanted to smell the bases of trees or poles. He wagged his tail at passersby and at one point rolled on the ground scratching his back. Edward and the dog returned to the bench after less than five minutes. Mr. Cuthbert sat there watching their return.

Before Edward or Charlie had properly sat, Mr. Cuthbert continued, “So I went to Norwood, North Carolina. That was no destination for me, didn’t mean anything to me, but that was as far as I could make it. I was out of money and luck. I sat in an alley like a homeless man, which I guess is what I was, a bum. I’d never been so low. I tried to ask people for money or food. To beg, it just drove a pick into my heart, my very soul, you see. I can’t even lie, I cried some nights. I didn’t know what to do or where to run.”

“I’m really sorry. Is that when Charlie came to you? In the alley?”

“Hell no, son. That alley wasn’t good for anything except misery. I walked around that town during the day and tried to get odds jobs. No one wanted to hire an old man. People told me there was bigger town here or there, a homeless shelter that way or this, and other such things. I just kept wandering, lost in many ways, if you know what I mean.”

“I do. I’m sorry,” Edward reached out his hand and patted Charlie on the head, not wanting to make eye contact with Mr. Cuthbert.

“Well, every dog has his day, ain’t that right, Charlie?” Mr. Cuthbert laughed. “And so my dog came to me, you see. I was walking down the road, a biscuit in hand thanks to the kindness of a large black woman like the one that got on the bus earlier—” Mr. Cuthbert let out a cough.

“And there was a book store to my right. I’ll never forget it. There was a sign on the window, written in marker or some such. It said DOGS ARE NOT OUR WHOLE LIFE, BUT THEY MAKE OUR LIVES WHOLE. It had some man’s name that I never heard of. I didn’t know if he was the one who said that or the owner of the place or what. But right there, just inside the door, was a dog. Not the dog you’re petting, but a dog with tits hanging low. The worn out face of one that just had pups.”

“So that was Charlie’s mom?” asked Edward.

“Sharp as a tack, you are. So this dog came to me, this one right here. Just a pup. No bigger than one of the small books they sold in that bookstore. I picked him up and cuddled him like a schoolgirl. The owner of the place watched the whole thing. He offered me a job, said that any man that loved dogs like I did couldn’t be half bad. He said I could have the puppy to boot. It’s a bit of a long story but this dog, and that man, saved my very life. The bookshop owner eventually retired, and he sent me off here to work with his brother. Paid my bus fare and everything.”

Mr. Cuthbert called for Charlie, and the dog licked his face as he bent over to talk to him. Edward stayed silent, appreciating the reunion and the memory that filled Mr. Cuthbert.

“Well, that was a lot of talking, wasn’t it? You mind holding the leash for this old pup,” he said as he pointed at himself, “so I can go to the bathroom? My bus should be coming, and it’ll be a long ride.”

“They let you take Charlie on the bus?” Edward asked.

Mr. Cuthbert stood, following the same process as previously. “Service dog. Certified. Can take ’im anywhere I wanna go, except the bathroom because he licks the floor with the piss on it and all.”

Edward nodded and took Charlie's leash. The dog stood as Mr. Cuthbert walked away in methodical steps. His suspenders moved in opposite torsion to his sliding feet. Edward decided to walk Charlie around a little. Mr. Cuthbert headed to the center of the park, toward the pavilion with restrooms. At his pace, it'd be a while before he made it.

Charlie and Edward followed a similar path and almost identical routine to their previous walk. Trees, poles, back scratches. Edward returned to the bench and petted Charlie as he lay at his feet. Another bus pulled up, a few more people got off than on, and it zoomed away. Edward checked his phone and the time. He pulled up some texts, watched a video, checked the time again.

After another five minutes, Edward prompted Charlie to stand, and the two headed for the pavilion. There was no sign of Mr. Cuthbert. It was only a four-minute walk for the dog and Edward, their pace quicker than Mr. Cuthbert's. The pavilion was round and had an entrance and exit door for the men's and women's restrooms, one pair on each side. Edward stuck his head in while trying to keep Charlie from licking the floor, but the dog seemed to have no interest in anything other than sniffing. Mr. Cuthbert was not inside the bathroom.

Back outside, Edward looked around the park, scanning for a slow moving old man. Someone shouted in the park, but Edward didn't hear the words clearly. Charlie bounded on the leash, and Edward had to hold the leash tightly to keep his grip.

"Stop, Charlie, stop! What the hell?" Edward held Charlie's chest with two hands and tried to soothe the dog with words and caresses. When he looked up, there was a woman on her cell phone around twenty feet in front of him. She held her index finger out, pointed up in the air, as though making the number one sign.

She spoke into her phone and Edward heard, “. . . as soon as you can! I found the guy who stole my dog.”