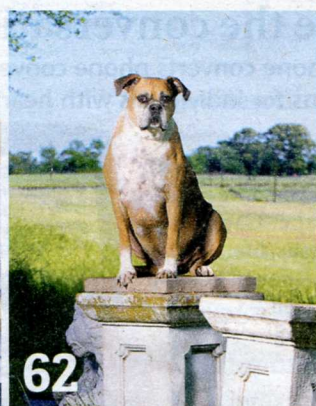




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Everything's bigger in Texas, especially...

Bull Dog's Heart



By **SAM ADAMS**

Tatum, Texas

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN SO MAD AT SOMEONE YOU JUST couldn't let it go? You were like, well, a bulldog with a bone? That's exactly how I was feeling that morning parking my pickup in the clay drive of the junkyard. I fixed my eyes on the owner: a heavy-set fella in denim overalls with a fierce scowl and cold-as-ice stare. I'd come to see him about an old Plymouth, but I had another thing on my mind. I glanced at my boxer-bulldog mix, Bull Dog, sitting on the passenger seat.

PHOTOS BY GREG PATTERSON

On second thought, maybe I'd let *him* handle the situation. After all, he was the aggrieved party.

You see, three months prior, my good buddy Charles had asked me to drive him to this junkyard and haul a broken-down truck on my trailer. I said yes even though I wasn't really feeling up to it. Truth was, I'd been pretty blue since my beloved bulldog Lucy died. I didn't think I'd ever get over it.

I've loved bulldogs all my life. For me, no other breed can top their sweetness and fierce loyalty. My wife, Sonja, saw Lucy at an Adopt-a-Pet event and I brought her home. Lucy was the sweetest thing I ever laid eyes on. But after just two years, we lost her to a stroke. I glanced that morning at the empty spot between Charles and me, where Lucy used to sit. It'd been 18 months without her and my heart still ached.

"There's the place," Charles said. I steered us down the long driveway. Oily tools and busted-up car parts littered the yard. There was a run-down shack and in the doorway, a portly man grimaced. Then I spotted something: a black-masked boxer bulldog chained to the bumper of a rusty old junker, barking nastily. "Oh, shut up, would ya!" the man hollered at him.

Right off my hackles got up. I could see that the dog was nothing but skin and bones. Where was his water bowl? His food? Not even a ratty pallet to lie on. How could anyone treat a dog that

way? I had to do something. Charles hopped out to talk to the man and I went to the dog. "Hey, fella," I said, sticking out my hand. The dog lunged, barking at me. *Whoa!* I jumped back.

"Better watch out!" the man warned. "He'll getcha!"

Go easy with him, I told myself. I knelt and reached out again, slowly this time, talking softly. Dogs need reassurance as much as people do, sometimes more. The bulldog strained against his chain, snapping at my fingers. He'd been tied up so long that the metal links had grown into his flesh.

"Hey!" I yelled at his owner. "Why don't you treat him better?"

"That ol' dog?" he snarled. "I don't care a flip about him!"

My blood boiled! And it wasn't just the Texas sun rising higher in the sky. "Well, I'll just put him in my truck then!"

The man hooted. "If you can get your hands on him, go right ahead."

I looked at the bulldog. *You're just mean 'cause you've been treated mean*, I thought. *God loves all his creatures, even a junkyard bulldog*. "C'mon," I said softly, still holding out my hand. "I won't hurt you." The dog struggled against his chain. Suddenly our eyes met. I felt a connection, like a current jumping between us. He knew I wasn't going to hurt him. His panting slowed. I stroked his jowls, then gave him a good scratch behind his ears—Lucy had always melted when I rubbed her there. He relaxed and stretched his neck like he was saying, "More please." Cautiously, I unsnapped the clasp on his

SWEETER THAN ANY JUNKYARD DOG

Wherever Sam goes, Bull Dog is by his side.

chain. All at once, he sprang forward, knocking me off balance.

Oh, no! I thought, bracing myself for an attack, for the crushing pressure of his jaws. First on my nose, then my cheeks and ears. Not bites. Licks! I was being kissed to death by a dog. "Good boy," I said, cracking up. The bulldog's paws wrapped me in a hug and he wiggled his stump of a tail. I led him to my truck and opened the door. He hopped right in.

Bull Dog would have to learn to trust that Sonja and I would take care of him. And I had to trust him too.

His owner stared at us, dumbfounded. "You're not really gonna take my dog, are ya?"

"I sure am," I replied. My blood set to boiling again. No way was I leaving this dog here with that man. *No way.*

With barely a nod, the man relented. Charles and I headed back with his vintage truck in tow and a grateful bulldog sitting between our seats.

Sonja met me in front of our farm. "Who's your friend?" she asked, eyeing the dog in the cab.

"I found him at the junkyard," I said, letting him out. "He wasn't being treated right and I just couldn't leave him there. He was miserable!" On cue, the dog ran straight for Sonja, leaped up and slurped her cheeks. We burst out laughing.

"He sure looks happy now," she said, wiping her face. "What are you going to name him?"

I decided on Bull Dog. It was a straight-up handle, a no-nonsense name. At first, I was worried, I have to admit. Most abused dogs have behavioral issues or take time to adjust to a new home. Dogs are proud creatures and when they've been hurt and humiliated it can take some doing to get that canine pride back. But after the

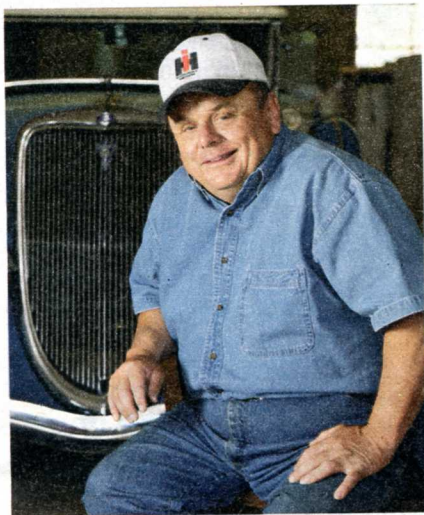
first couple of days it was clear someone good had trained Bull Dog—he knew all his basic commands and didn't give us an ounce of trouble. If he could have talked I think he would have said thank you. Still,

I worried over the situation—what if Bull Dog got territorial, snapped at our other animals? I said a prayer that he would keep his cool.

I brought Bull Dog to the vet. "He's a good one," the vet said. "Very even-tempered for what he's been through. It's kind of a miracle, you know?"

On the way home I stopped at a café for my favorite snack: pinto beans and cornbread. I set the bag on the passenger-side floorboard. Bull Dog didn't so much as sniff it. What a perfect dog! Back home, I got out of the truck and went around to let Bull Dog out. He had a big ol' smile on his face... and beans and cornbread dripping from his jowls!

"No, Bull Dog!" I shouted. "Bad boy!" Bull Dog cocked his head and perked



TRUE ORIGINALS Sam's 1934 Ford Deluxe Roadster is his favorite of his antique cars.

his ears. Then it hit me: He had never known when his next meal would be. Now he'd have to learn to trust that Sonja and I would take care of him. And I had to trust him too. Deep down inside he was as good as a dog can be.

We showered Bull Dog with love. And he gave us love right back. He'd watch over Sonja and me while we worked on the farm and slept next to our bed at night. As for getting along with our other animals? Let's just say our calico's new sleeping spot was smack on top of Bull Dog's back.

But just because Bull Dog could put the treatment he'd suffered behind him didn't mean I could. The sweeter Bull

Dog was, the more riled up I got at the junkyard guy. And when I saw the scars where the heavy chains had once chafed his skin, I burned inside. That man deserved the same treatment! Or worse. I was so mad I couldn't even pray. I didn't *want* to pray. I wanted to be as mad as I could get.

Now, here I was, parked back at his junkyard, Bull Dog by my side. The burly man sauntered up to my truck. I rolled down the passenger-side window. "Oh, you still got my dog!" he said.

"That's right," I said, nodding. "Now he's *my* dog." Bull Dog, seated on his haunches next to me, sniffed the air.

The man began telling me about the old Plymouth I was interested in. He rested his big hand on the open window frame. Bull Dog locked his eyes on it, and leaned forward. *Oh, he's gonna let him have it!* I thought, waiting for Bull Dog to launch. *I oughta let him get his due, let him have a piece of this old boy.* I could hardly believe what happened next. Gently, *forgivingly*, Bull Dog inclined his head and licked his abuser's hand.

Suddenly I remembered the story of Joseph in the Bible. He was sold into slavery by his brothers, yet he forgave them without hesitation. *All right, Lord*, I said to myself. *I think I understand.* If Bull Dog could pardon this man, then I could too. Aren't we meant to love and not hate, to forgive and not hold a grudge? Who knew it was a lesson I would learn from a junkyard dog with a heart as big as Texas? ©



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