

Trooper's Tomatoes

Written by:
Betsy Bearden

It was the summer of 1990 and my husband, Steven, and I had adopted a beautiful cocker spaniel. He was eight weeks old and so small, with soft, down-like fur in his puppy stage, and ran on endless energy. We named him "Skyler." After having him for a year, we decided he needed a friend.

One day while visiting with her, my mother-in-law told me about an abandoned cocker spaniel in her neighborhood, so we rescued the poor little thing. Her name was Coco. Skyler would lunge at Coco and wag his tail, nipping playfully at her, but at eight years old, she showed him who was going to be boss by snapping at him when he wanted to play. She was a sweet dog, but too old and grumpy for the playful Skyler. We found Coco a nice family who also had a cocker spaniel around her age, so she went home with them and all was well.

Just when it looked as if Skyler wasn't going to have a friend, a co-worker, Rob, asked me to come look at his dog. He said he had taken it in from a friend who traveled a lot. Why he took the dog in the first place was a mystery to me, as he just didn't seem like the dog-lover type and was a bachelor who also traveled quite often.

He said it was messing up his carpet, and trashing the house, so he moved the dog to the garage. But the dog was soiling his garage as well, and that was where he and his buddies worked out with all his exercise equipment. "I tell ya the dog is unruly, he's makin' me crazy," he said with his thick, Brooklyn New York accent, which seemed so out of place in Marietta, Georgia! "I tell ya, I come home every day and there are three (expletives) all over the place. I'm gonna kill that dog if I don't get rid of it!"

So, reluctantly, Steven and I took Skyler to meet the *beast*. The dog was the same age as Skyler, and a cocker spaniel. He had red, curly hair and a little stub of a tail, that when he wagged it, his entire backside shimmied. He reminded me of a cute, red-haired freckle-faced little boy, with a very gentle disposition. I asked Skyler if he wanted us to bring the dog home, and he was so excited that he peed. They took to each other immediately. The little redhead's name was Trooper.

Trooper had been raised in an apartment. Playtime was leash dependent at about 15 minutes each outing. When Rob took him in, I doubt Trooper was ever walked, which would explain the mess in the house. When we brought Trooper home, removed his leash, and set him down in the fenced back yard, he didn't move. Trooper sat and looked at us and at the large yard in front of him. We worked with him and told him to "Go ... explore!" Skyler showed him the way, and after a while, it was nearly impossible to get Trooper to come back in the house!

In case you are wondering—no, he never messed in our house: not once.

He and Skyler got along like best buds. The following summer after bringing him home we planted a vegetable garden in the back yard. The ground was tilled, and planted with eggplant, squash, bell peppers, and tomatoes—lots of tomatoes. The rows of freshly tilled earth were warmed by the summer sun, and it became quite the hang out for Skyler and Trooper. They loved to spread out on the soft warm mounds of earth, and to feel the warmth of it against their little bellies. This was nice if the soil was dry, but after a rain, they found another favorite past time and that was to roll around in the slush like two little pigs. They would have to be lined up and hosed down before coming in the house. Keeping them out of the garden was definitely going to be a problem not only for us, but also for the plants.

After several weeks had passed small green tomatoes started showing up on the living room carpet. Several more weeks passed, and half-eaten *ripe* tomatoes showed up on the carpet. Was something disturbing the tomatoes? Were the dogs picking them up from the yard and bringing them in the house to let us know? Hmmm.

While weeding the garden one afternoon, the mystery was solved. Trooper walked right over to one of my tomato plants, teeth bared like some wild-eyed Billy goat, and he proceeded to purse his lips and plucked off the sweetest, ripest tomato he could find. Oh, you could tell this was not the first time. He was a pro at it, a *pro* I tell you! He sashayed out of the garden, tomato vine hanging from his jowls, and went to town on it! I ask you—what dog eats tomatoes off the vine? Honestly!

It is a good thing that we have always practiced organic gardening, and never used any harmful pesticides. Because I had read about companion planting, that certainly helped my gardening efforts by adding marigolds and nasturtiums to keep pests away from the tomatoes, but what about dogs? The whole situation was so funny, that we allowed him to eat as many tomatoes as he wanted. There was plenty to go around. The garden flourished, and there was still a banner crop.

The boys grew closer with each passing year. Then, at the age of four, Skyler developed juvenile cataracts, and at one point before his cataract surgery he was practically blind. Somehow, Trooper knew this, and he honestly helped guide Skyler up and down the steps of the deck, and around the back yard. He would walk down the steps at Skyler's side, and stick close to him in the yard, and of course he nudged Skyler into the garden, you know, toward the tomatoes. Trooper had to have his partner-in-crime, didn't he?

After the cataract surgery, Skyler lost an eye due to complications, but due to the cataract removal, he was able to see quite well from his right eye. Over the years, they remained BFFs but much to our horror, at the age of nine, Trooper developed cancer. Steven and I took him to a veterinary oncologist, and he was administered chemo treatment for many months, but in the long run, he finally had to be put down.

As much as we wanted to think we were really helping Trooper by prolonging his life, and the treatments really did work to a certain extent, there comes the time when you just

have to let go. For selfish reasons, we continued his treatment, but he suffered even more in the long run. We didn't know this was going to be the case, as we really thought we could beat the cancer. We gave our hearts to Trooper, because he gave us so much happiness and joy; so did Skyler. You can't measure or buy the kind of happiness that they gave us.

After going through one of the most heartbreaking things in life you can ever imagine, we buried sweet Trooper under a shade tree in our back yard, with a perfect view of the vegetable garden. One year later, at the age of ten, and having suffered bad health for years, my most beloved Skyler passed on and was buried beside him. They are with God; of this, I am certain.

The same year Skyler left us in January, a little stray dog wandered into our lives in October. It was rainy, and cold. The poor little thing was obviously abandoned. He was soaking wet, stinky, matted, and starving. After taking him to the vet, it was discovered he was approximately two years old, and we were told he was a Lhasa Apso. We tried to tie his name to his Tibetan roots and came up with the name of "Yogi." I know that Skyler and Trooper led him to us. They knew Yogi needed us as much as we needed him.

Yogi filled a huge void in my life and we quickly became inseparable. One spring day before we had planted our vegetable garden, Yogi was digging in the area and when I walked over to see what he was doing, I noticed a tomato plant growing close by. This was odd, because it was still too early in the season, and no tomatoes had yet been planted. It occurred to me that Yogi led me to that spot, so I could see the tomato plant that miraculously showed up in the garden that day.

Since then, a tomato plant comes back on its own each year in different areas of our yard or in the raised bed garden we now have, and when it does, we stop for a moment and reflect upon the memories we shared with our beloved boys. Trooper and Skyler taught us that whenever in life you give from your heart, you will indeed get something back in return. We loved our boys unconditionally and they gave back in thanks by guiding little Yogi into our lives, along with the annual return of Trooper's tomatoes.

End.

Betsy Bearden

betsybearden@gmail.com

www.creativewrites.net