

Soul Sniffer

By

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“Ready or not, buddy, here they come,” I warned the fluffy bundle of white as he leaned against my leg.

Einstein shifted to attention, his black eyes alert on the group of seventh graders as they jostled their way to my classroom. Within five minutes, the little bichon would be asleep under my desk, unable to handle the stimulation of another group of kids who vied for his attention. It wasn't often that Einstein accompanied me to school. The noise level was a little much for him, but the socialization was important. Plus, the kids loved it.

“Hey, Ms. Sienes. You brought Einstein today!” A couple of the girls dropped to their knees to give him a scratch and a hug, and they didn't care that twenty other kids jammed up behind them.

Einstein moaned in ecstasy as Michaela rubbed just the right spot under his chin.

“He's so cute.” Her high, squeaky voice rose an octave.

“Well, he certainly likes you, kiddo.”

The kids passed Einstein, one by one, and most greeted him with a quick pat on his soft head. The small dog's tail wagged in response, but he stayed glued to my side. Once everyone passed, I started to pull the door closed when I spotted Sam. Eyes downcast, he walked with heavy steps, as if half the seventh-grade class weighed down his shoulders.

“Are you okay, Sam?” I asked when he drew closer. “It's not like you to be late.” He was my most enthusiastic student, and one of the brightest I had that year.

He shrugged, then his face crumpled.

“What’s wrong?” I did a quick scan for evidence of an injury, but saw nothing.

“Someone stole all my video games. I had them in my P.E. locker.”

Einstein stepped up to Sam and whined, as if tuned into his mood.

“Video games? Why did you bring them to school?”

“I was gonna to sell some of them. My mom’s gonna be really mad. She told me leave them at home, and now they’re gone.” He sniffled as tears pooled in his eyes.

“I guess that’s a hard lesson in obedience.” I knew my response was less than compassionate, but there always seemed to be some kind of drama with Sam. I expected it from the girls—but Sam was my only drama king.

“What am I gonna do?”

“Did you report it to the office?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, there isn’t anything else to do then. Let’s go into the classroom and focus on the day’s assignment.”

He schlepped inside and swiped at his tears while Einstein and I followed.

I called the class to order as Einstein moved to his favorite position under my desk. This was the last of three groups of students, and he was as ready to go home as they were.

“Okay, let’s go over today’s quote and history mystery.” That ought to get Sam’s attention. His was always the first hand in the air to answer the history trivia question. But when I looked to him with expectation, his head was buried on folded arms on his desk.

“What’s Sam’s problem?” Quentin asked. “Somebody die or something?”

I reprimanded Quentin with a look, but found it difficult to drum up sympathy for Sam myself. Maybe a little distraction would work. “Hey, Sam. You want to give the history mystery a shot?”

Head still down, he shook it in an emphatic *NO*.

Best to ignore the situation. “Anyone else?” Three hands shot in the air, and Sam was all but forgotten as we got into the classroom routine.

Ten minutes later, I moved to my desk to retrieve the day’s assignment and realized that Einstein was no longer there. I shot my eyes to the door to be sure it was closed. The last time he came to school with me, he snuck out, and I didn’t even notice until the school secretary called to say he was with her in the office. But no, the door was shut.

“Has anyone seen Einstein?”

Michaela pointed toward Sam.

I crouched down to peer under Sam’s desk. Einstein’s head was nestled in Sam’s lap. Sam’s head was still down, but he had one hand tangled in Einstein’s ear. My heart melted a little at the sight of my gentle dog unable to ignore a sad soul. It had been that way from the time he was a small pup. Our first ever walk in town, he tugged on his leash to get to a distraught baby in a stroller. It was in his nature to sooth and comfort.

The truth was my dog was more compassionate than I. Some days it was a chore to deal with middle-school misery: homework that never got done; Students who were more interested in who wore what than in a decent education; entitlement attitudes. My heart had hardened a little each year I taught.

With my focus back on the day's agenda, I passed out the assignments and explained the objective. In the midst of being taskmaster and teacher, I'd all but forgotten about Sam's misery until I heard laughter from his side of the room.

The obvious glee drew a smile from me. "What's going on there?"

"Look at Einstein," Quentin said, finger pointed toward Sam.

Sam was upright again, a huge grin on his flushed face. Einstein had both paws on Sam's chair as he pushed his wet, black nose into Sam's hand—a demand to be petted. This was not Einstein's usual M.O. He loved attention, but he never sought it out with someone he didn't know. The more Sam giggled, the more Einstein played with him.

"What's Einstein trying to do?" asked Michaela.

I laughed. "I think he wants to make Sam happy again. It looks like he's succeeded, too."

A few minutes later, his objective complete, Einstein made his way back to his place of solitude under my desk and promptly went to sleep.

An hour later, as the class was dismissed, Sam knelt next to Einstein and gave him a belly rub. "You're a good boy, aren't you?" he crooned to the dog before he headed out the door with a group of boys. Smile in place, it seemed he'd all but forgotten the stolen video games.

After the classroom was empty, the quiet was almost deafening. I dropped into my chair as Einstein eased out from under the desk. He propped his chin on my lap with a sigh.

"You certainly are a good boy," I whispered to him before I dropped a kiss on his downy soft head. "I need to be more like you, buddy." I combed his silky soft ears with my fingers as a lump of shame rose in my throat.

He had a well-tuned radar for the broken and sorrowful and it was his nature to bring a little love and compassion to each soul he encountered. It was a lesson I needed to be reminded of more often. That day, my sweet dog turned out to be my teacher.