

The Hot Dog Dog

BY MARION WILLIAMS-BENNETT



I am doing what seemed impossible during the pandemic: standing unmasked with dozens of other people at the Brookline Hills T stop, waiting to get on a packed D Line train and head to the office. Two years ago, the scene around this area was dramatically different — and not just because of the pandemic. Back then, the MBTA station was being renovated, a new high school building was under construction, and the surrounding park was torn up in preparation for a transformation.

In normal times, having a parade of construction workers, convoys of trucks, and nonstop clanging near your house would be unnerving. But in the early days of the pandemic, the construction site became my community, creating an unexpected connection for my dog, Wilbur, and me.

The heart of this expansive construction site was the canteen truck. Every day at 10 a.m., the truck announced its arrival with its distinctive horn. Hungry crews adorned in yellow safety vests and helmets layered with stickers swarmed around the truck, where they were greeted by John, the owner.

Tall, wearing a dark baseball cap, hoodie, and track pants, John stood out in the sea of yellow vests. His ritual never varied: He'd pull up, drop his cigar, leap out, and open the truck's side panels to reveal a bounty of food.

No one knew this food selection better than Wilbur. He's a curious mix of a Labrador retriever and basset hound; think of an all-black basset with the head of a lab. A truck full of food was nectar for Wilbur, and each day our walks

brought us closer to the source.

One day, John asked if Wilbur would like a hot dog. I said, "If you give this dog a hot dog, he'll be back every day?"

John laughed, but in the year that followed, Wilbur and I *were* back. Every day. At 9:55 a.m., Wilbur would beg to go out, then run down the street, pulling tight on his leash, racing to gather with the crew to wait for the truck — and his hot dog.

After a couple of months, Wilbur's reputation ballooned. On our walks, someone from the construction team would spot Wilbur, point to him,

and ask, "Hey, is that the hot dog dog?"

"The one and only," I'd reply as Wilbur wagged his tail.

As months went by, I realized how important the hot dog ritual had become to me. During the long days of social isolation, my brief talks with John were the only in-person contacts I had outside my house. I celebrated these moments.

We were a year into our hot dog ritual — and the pandemic — when Wilbur injured his paw. I told John that Wilbur needed to rest. There could be no racing to the truck.

With worry, John said, "Aww, poor boy!"

The next day, I heard the familiar sound of the truck's horn, but closer. Wilbur limped to the front porch with me. To our delight, there was John, his canteen truck parked right outside my house.

We watched as he performed his usual ritual, with a twist: leaping out of the truck, opening the back, grabbing a hot dog, and then coming up to the porch to deliver it to one customer: Wilbur.

"We've gotta take care of the dog," John said. My eyes filled with tears of gratitude, and I gave him a hug.

As hoped, the world came back. Today, I stand in the shiny new T station, waiting for the train to take me into a city reawakened. John visits other construction sites, including the massive project on Mass. Ave. Wilbur and I still walk our well-worn route. When we do, he still sniffs at the spot where the truck used to be. I pause, too, remembering the dark days of the pandemic and how the kindness of one person helped me make it through, one hot dog at a time.

Marion Williams-Bennett is a writer in Brookline. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.