

Free Pepsi At Dennys

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One day when I was about 17, I went to Denny's with my girlfriend for lunch. Our waitress was an interesting lady, but brought us a satisfying meal of cheese sticks and coffee. After our meal we headed to the checkout counter to pay up.

At the edge of the counter, occupying the last barstool was an older man who appeared homeless, wearing old grungy clothes, with a collection of beat up bags and clothing scattered around him.

When we all arrived at the cash register, for some reason our waitress just stood there, holding our ticket, but didn't seem interested in touching the register.

Then the homeless man waved at me and said, "Hi, buddy, do you like Pepsi?"

And by chance, I did like Pepsi, in fact at the time I was buying a 16 ounce Pepsi almost every day, so I replied, "Sure I do."

"Great," he replied, pulling a hand out of his pocket to show me a handful of Pepsi bottle-caps. "You want some free 16 ounce's?"

"Those are all winners?" I counted eight caps in his hand.

He showed the inside of the caps and sure enough, they were all winners. "Here you go," he said. "Take em. They're yours."

"No, no," I replied, not wanting to take handouts from a homeless person and not wanting to pay for them either.

"Here," he insisted. "Take em. You drink Pepsi don't you?"

And I stuttered. I knew I would use the caps and they'd save me a few bucks, but I still lived with my parents but had a decent job so I had a lot of extra spending money and felt bad, as though this guy didn't realize that I wasn't down on my luck as he was.

But as I tried to refuse his offer, our waitress leaned over the counter, raised her voice dramatically, and in almost a shout she said, "Do you know why I hate snakes?"

I turned my attention back to our waitress to find her staring at me with a strange, frantic intensity.

"It's because they're icky and slimy and gross," she continued. "They're all long and scaly - I have a friend who has a snake - I just can't understand why someone would want one - you have to be crazy -

there's people who hold them and pet them – you couldn't *pay* me to hold a snake - what kind of a person would do that? - you've got to be absolutely out of your mind.” And she paused for only a split second. “I held a snake once – it was at my friend's house and he tried to crawl down my shirt and I was like ‘aaaahhh get it away!’”

And as she spoke, I felt the man next to me take hold of my wrist, pry my hand open, and one by one, shove the winning bottle caps into my hand, careful not to let any drop.

Finally when our waitress' snake speech had ended I turned back to the man, trying to give the bottle caps back, but he simply folded his arms and turned away. “Take!” he said.

So I put them in my pocket, said thanks and turned back to the waitress, who was now just staring silently at me. “What's up?” she asked.

“Could I pay for my food?” I asked.

“Oh yeah!” she said. “I knew there was a reason I was here.”