

THE MAGNIFICENT MOOCHER

“I need some rat poison,” Herb said to the cashier at the Ace Hardware store. It was the coldest January in the history of Blythewood, South Carolina and it sure felt like it. As he watched the cashier head toward a far-away isle, he rubbed the gray stubble on his unshaven chin and pulled his wool cap down tighter on his bald head. It didn’t even feel warm inside the store. He was seventy-seven this past June and he had noticed that even on warm days he often felt cold.

When the cashier returned with the requested rat poison, he said, “You aren’t still using that old oil heater inside your house, are you Mr. Herb?”

Herb looked over the top of his bifocals and glared at the young man. “What do you know about oil heaters, sonny? That heater belonged to my daddy. It’s a perfectly good oil heater. It’ll most likely last longer than me,” he said and slapped a five dollar bill onto the counter. His gaze challenged that of Toms as the cashier bagged Herb’s purchase.

Tom reached out and gingerly picked up the five and made change. He smiled as he handed Herb his money. "It's just, I thought maybe someone ought to give the heater the once over." He shrugged. "You know, make sure it's safe for another year."

"Just in case you want to sell me a new heater? Well, I can't afford a new heater." Which wasn't true, but he'd been in a snit ever since the weather had turned cold and his body had begun feeling as if it had frozen over. "I'm on social security and now I got rats tryin' to get in out of the cold. They seem to think my old heater works pretty good." Herb stuffed his wallet into his hip pocket, snatched up his paper bag and shuffled to the door.

Tom said, Happy New Year and sighed as he watched the old man disappear outside.

Bernie, the store manager, sidled up next to Tom. "Who was that?"

"Old man Wilson. Boy, he used to be so nice. Then his wife died and he's gotten mean."

"Aw," Bernie said, "It's probably been real tough on the old man. Being all alone and all."

When Herb pulled his sixty-eight Ford truck into his single carport he spied a large black mutt out by his garbage can. He got out waved his sack and yelled, "Get on now! Ain't nothin' for you round here!" The bone-thin mutt scooted away into the brush and Herb headed for the side door leading into his kitchen.

He put the key into the lock and turned it, pushing against the door. They'd had so much wet weather the old wood was swollen just like his joints. It was stuck and he had

to shoulder his way into the kitchen. “Darn thing. Guess I’ll have to fix that some day. Place is falling apart just like you said, Clare.” He still talked to his wife of forty-five years, but she was gone, buried down in a plot at the church cemetery. He made a funny sound in his throat, then said, “I’ll be there soon enough. Won’t have to worry ‘bout stayin’ warm then,” he murmured.

He put the opened container of Decon beneath his kitchen sink and walked into the big living room where he stood warming his old, wrinkled hands over the oil heater standing in the center of the floor. He thought he heard scratching at the side door. “What the heck?”

Back in the kitchen, Herb peered out the little door window, jerked it open and yelled, “Get on outta here, mutt!” at the scrawny beggar. The dog hesitated, dark pleading brown eyes bored into his. But the unspoken request was denied. Herb yelled even louder, unnerved by the dog’s gaze and the raw wound on the dog’s left shoulder. Aw, geez.” Herb cringed. “Get! Scram!” He stomped and the dog scurried away. “Beggin’ moocher. That’s all we got round here is a bunch of moochers. First the rats, now you!”

He shuffled back into the living room again and pulled his rocker as close to the heater as he could get it, then turned on his old box-style TV. “See if that Mayberry is on,” he said aloud, but in the back of his mind he saw the dark eyes of the mutt. “Not good for nothin’,” he whispered.

The weather flashed on the TV. “A low of seventeen is expected tonight in the Midlands, folks. Cover up the tender plants and bring in the dog and cat.”

“Gull darn,” Herb muttered. Then—as clear as a bell, he heard his Clare say, “Herbert, do not become a grump in your old age.” And then he heard her teasing, light laughter and could have sworn he felt her finger poke him in the shoulder.

“I hear you,” he said, sighing as he stood. He shuffled toward the kitchen door and peered outside again. Sure enough, there was the cur sitting there—waiting. “Yeah, just like I figured. She must have told you to come back.” He rolled his eyes and the dog’s tail flagged on icy concrete. Herb unlocked the door and tugged it open. “Come on. I already got rats. I guess one more moocher ain’t gonna make no never mind.” The mutt swished past his legs, ran into the kitchen as if he’d done it a million times, maybe more. “Just don’t go gettin’ too comfortable now,” he said to the dog’s disappearing backside.

He didn’t have dog food. He’d not had a dog in years. So he unfroze hamburger in the microwave. Set out a bowl of water and mixed some rolled oats and a raw egg into the thawed hamburger mess then offered it to the mutt. The dog made short work of the meal. As soon as the mutt had finished eating Herb smeared Neosporin on the dog’s wound. “You been smacked pretty hard there fella,” he said. “I can’t do nothin’ for that broke tail of yours, though. It’s already mended. Probably got caught in a door you didn’t get through fast enough, is my guess.” Herb smiled at the dog. “Ain’t none of us perfect, are we?”

The dog followed at his heels now: total obedience gained with oat-rolled hamburger. Herb kicked a throw rug over next to the oil heater and the dog laid down on it, but his eyes watched the old man’s every move. When Herb settled back down into his rocker, the mutt seemed satisfied and put his head down. Herb ignored the dog, but said,

“I hope you’re satisfied, Clare.” Her smiling face flashed into his mind and he smiled back.

Channel ten had long since signed off, but that wasn’t what woke him. It was the mutt tugging on the sleeve of his sweater. “What?” Herb said sleepily. “Okay, okay,” he said and coughed. The dog barked. “I said okay.” But Herb didn’t move instead he put his head back on the head rest and closed his eyes. The mutt barked again. “Yeah,” he said and flicked his hand. The dog grabbed him by the pant leg and pulled. “Hey,” Herb said, startled. “What?”

This time the dog didn’t stop barking and Herb’s cough became severe. It was then that Herb smelled the fumes. “Oh, no,” he muttered. He struggled up and staggered to the side door but the darn door wouldn’t open and he had no strength. As he slid to the floor he thought about how silly he was going to look when someone found him.

The large mutt ran through the house—searching for an escape. He stopped, eyed the plate glass picture window and ran for it, smashing through onto the glass splattered frozen ground out front. He ran next door, paws scratching on the front door of Bill Jones’ house, he barked and barked. The porch light clicked on. “Who are you?” Bill asked rubbing his eyes and hesitating as if the dog could answer. The skinny dog ran a tight circle and darted off toward Herb Wilson’s place. Bill stepped outside and tied his bathrobe tighter. Frowning, he said, “What the . . . ?”

He watched as the mutt ran to the front of Herb’s house and he followed. He saw the broken window. “Geez. Herb?” he shouted and bent forward. “Herb—you in there?”

He poked his head through and wrinkled his nose at the smell. “Herb!” he shouted with force, and climbed through the window. Covering his nose with the corner of his robe, he turned the heater off on his way through the house. He found Herb collapsed on the kitchen floor. The wall phone was right there and he dialed 911 and gave the operator directions, then he dragged Herb outside.

The dog was still there. His tongue swiped Herb’s cheek and the old man’s eyes fluttered open. “Dang, moocher,” he said and passed out again.

In the emergency room, Bill said, “It was that lanky black dog that saved you, Herb. I didn’t know you even had a dog. Fact is I didn’t think you liked animals at all.”

Herb didn’t answer right away. He swallowed, trying to put the words in his head just right. “Didn’t have a dog. I do now. His name’s Moocher.” He decided not to address the part about not liking animals because it had just occurred to him that he hadn’t like much of anything of late. Well . . . since his Clare had passed.

Bill nodded.

Now that he’d begun talking, he went right on. “Moocher’s a good dog. Sometimes mutts are the best ones. He must have gotten into a fight sometime or another. He has that raw spot on his shoulder. I’ll have to put up a back yard fence for him . . . Herb blinked up at Bill. “To keep him home,” he explained. Herb wasn’t about to voice his suspicions that Clare had sent that dog and just in the nick of time, too. “Yep. He’s a good one.”

“Maybe you should consider using your electric heat for awhile, Herb. Otherwise we’ll be worrying about you.”

“Yeah. It might even be cheaper to use electric, anyway. Replacing that glass window all the time would be costly.”

Bill smiled. “I’ll fix your kitchen door for you tomorrow.”

Herb’s bushy brows rose. “Thank you, Bill. Seems I’ve got lots to be thankful for. I need to get home and see to Moocher, then I need to call the glass place and the fence folks.” He swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Bill reached out to steady his neighbor. “Sounds like some changes coming for you this year, Herb. Moocher is home with Betty. He’s just fine. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yep. Let’s get out of here. I need to stop by the Kwik Market and get some dog food. Course, now that I’ve gone and given the mutt hamburger, he probably won’t eat the other stuff.” The two men chuckled.

“Did I ever tell you about the farm Clare and I once had?”

“No. You never have.”

“I’ll tell you about it on the way home.” Herb suddenly remembered his literature teacher way back in high school. He hadn’t thought of her in over sixty years but now he remembered her words as clear as if he were sitting on that hard pine bench right this moment. Mrs. Carmichael had taught all tenth graders that there would be times when some one’s appearance would not be an indication of greatness. Herb smiled because this was just such a case. The mutt dog with the crooked tail had surely saved his life and was now thought of by him as The Magnificent Moocher.

THE END