

A MENAGERIE OF COMMONALITY

New construction always serves as fodder for the rumor mill in Cedar Crossing. The latest subject has entered as a new building out on Route 21, only about a mile from St. John. While those in the Oak County Building Department know the true story, they continue to remain mum so they can enjoy the breadth of speculation. In the brief time since they pounded the survey stakes into the ground, I've heard everything from a new factory for space rockets to a new warehouse for a cookie maker (no, I didn't start that one). The former came from the barbershop and the latter from the hardware store. Add a new McDonald's restaurant claim that originated from a booth in the Chit Chat Café, and you can see how minds starving for enlightenment keep the rumor mill churning. Despite reassurances from an unnamed reliable source that a McDonald's restaurant would be a remote possibility in the middle of farmland ten miles from town, Harvey the proprietor of the Chit Chat Café has hedged his bets and started serving more generous portions on his lunch specials. With the

church so close to the new construction, I am frequently consulted on its progress. After a couple of cups of coffee at the Chit Chat Café, I give highly questionable updates.

Alas, a new sign appeared on the subject property—Coming soon: Hartman’s Veterinary Clinic. Such a revelation just about put the final nail in the coffin of speculation on the matter. I say, “Just about”, for it merely meant that now the focus shifted to the owner, Jeremiah Hartman. Here again, conversations ran the gamut from a disbarred lawyer turned veterinarian to a Chinese spy planting intelligence gathering devices into our dogs, cats, and cows. A certain amount of disappointment came with the news that Jeremiah Hartman came from a farm upstate and loved working with animals.

About a month after the doors to the veterinary clinic opened, I received an urgent phone call.

“Hello, this is Pastor Schmidt.”

“Is this Pastor Schmidt?” the voice asked.

“Yes,” I said, smiling. “Yes, it is. Who do I have the pleasure of talking to?”

“This is Fee-Fee.”

“Um, I don’t believe I know a Fee-Fee,” I replied.

“I don’t mean Fee-Fee,” said the voice. “Pastor, I meant this is Rebecca Long. I’m sorry. I’m a little befuddled right now.”

“Hi, Rebecca. What can I do for you?”

“It’s Fee-Fee, Pastor. Can you come over right away?”

“Fee-Fee? I’m sorry, Rebecca. I don’t understand. Who’s Fee-Fee?”

“Fee-Fee is my baby.”

Rebecca Long is in her 80s, so I felt the need for a little more information.

“Your baby, Rebecca?”

“Yes, Fee-Fee started chasing this toad in the backyard, and then all of a sudden, she collapsed and got really stiff.”

“Can you get her to the hospital, Rebecca?”

“The hospital?” asked Rebecca. “Do they take dogs there? My car broke down yesterday. Should I call an ambulance?”

“Ah, Fee-Fee is your dog ... Okay ... no, don’t call an ambulance. I’ll come over right away and take her to the vet.”

“Thank you, Pastor.”

Sometimes, as a pastor in a small town, you encounter situations that are not covered in an academic setting. Besides, I wanted to meet the new vet, anyway.

Well, Fee-Fee survived, and the doc had some time to talk.

“So, tell me, Dr. Hartman. What brought you to Cedar Crossing?”

“I went to college with a guy by the name of Bret Collins, who grew up here.”

“Sure, I know Bret and the Collins family.”

“Bret always had a copy of The Cedar Crossing Gazette lying around, and I started reading it. I worked in Tennessee for a couple of years after I graduated from veterinary school. Then I got married, had two children, and moved back to this state. In the back of my mind, though, I always thought I might like to live here someday. I talked with Doctor Harris a lot, and when he told me that he wanted to slow down and focus on wildlife in

his remaining years, it seemed like the opportune time to make the move.”

“How does your family feel about it?”

“Sadly, my wife passed away last year, but if she were here, I think she’d love it. As a small-town girl, she would have fit right in. My kids are having a ball.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your wife. If you ever need anything, I’m just down the road.”

“I appreciate that, Pastor.”

“Well, we’re glad to have you. And, to think we owe it all to the Cedar Crossing Gazette.”

“A Matisse in the medium of words.”

“That’s good ... We probably better not tell Victor, the publisher that, though. We’d never hear the end of it.”

“I defer to your wisdom in that regard.”

“Of course, you’re always welcome to join us at St. John on Sunday morning. Most of the time, my sermons are short.”

“We might just do that, Pastor. I was raised Catholic, though.”

“Well, if our brand doesn’t quite fit, Father Tom at St. Mary’s would love to have you join them, too ... He does pay me a commission for any referrals.”

“Oh, how much does he pay? I have to see who’s going to offer me the best deal.”

“I’m sorry. Any discussion of that would violate the confidentiality of the confessional.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want you to violate anything like that, Pastor.”

About that time, a young lad came bounding into the room followed by a large Golden Retriever. The boy stopped and turned to face the dog. He gave the dog some signs with his hands, and the dog came over to me. The dog sat down and lifted his paw to greet me. Naturally, I took his paw and said, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Amos is glad to meet you, too,” said the boy. “But he can’t hear you because he’s deaf.”

The lad then gave Amos some more signs, and the Golden Retriever walked over to the counter and laid down.

Before I could say anything more, the boy blurted out, “Wanna see my horse?”

I looked at Dr. Hartman, and he said, “My son Gary.”

“Sure,” I said.

Following the boy outside, I was led over to a paddock where I saw my first three-legged horse. Gary whistled, and the horse hobbled over to the fence.

“This is Raven,” said Gary.

Gently patting the horse’s neck, I said, “He’s a beautiful horse, Gary.”

“I named him Raven because he’s all black, and he has a raven friend who’s always flying over and landing on his back.”

“They’re good buddies then?”

“Yes ... and my dad’s working on a leg for Raven in his workshop.”

“I see ... but he still gets around pretty good.”

“Yes.”

Gary put his hand to his mouth, made a screeching sound, and looked up to the sky. He waited a minute and made the sound again. A one-eyed red-tailed hawk soon joined us, landing on the

fence. Gary reached into his pocket and pulled out a treat, which the hawk quickly consumed.

“And this would be?” I asked.

“Tuesday,” answered Gary.

“Tuesday?” I asked, looking puzzled.

“Yes. We found him alongside the road on a Tuesday. My dad said he was lucky to be alive. We brought him back here and helped him get better.”

The boy then made another sound and waited. Charging out from under a mulberry bush, a raccoon with no tail eagerly snatched a treat from Gary’s hand. Dr. Hartman came outside and joined us as we conversed with Petunia, the raccoon.

“Are you meeting the rest of the family?” asked Dr. Hartman.

“Yes, they are certainly an affable group,” I answered.

“We’re fortunate to have this place with the acreage because my son finds someone new to adopt every week.”

“Do you get bulk price discounts on the groceries?” I queried.

“I have to.”

As I met each new resident, I noticed a common point.

When Dr. Hartman perceived the wheels of thought expressed on my face, he said, “I call them a menagerie of commonality.”

“Your son seems to have a special place in his heart for the animals, especially those with some disability. What inspired him to ...”

Before I could finish asking the question, Gary got down on the ground and began talking to an earless red fox. He eventually coaxed him to join us by holding out a treat. I continued to watch in wonder as the boy and the fox interacted without speaking. As I started to look back up to Dr. Hartman to finish my question, I noticed the gleam of metal coming out from the bottom of both of Gary’s pant legs.

I felt a sense of awe as I received the answer to my unfinished question. Dr. Hartman looked at me and nodded.