

Rascal and Marvin

By Jim Turner

We walked to the end of the street and through the columns marking our neighborhood. Jean turned right onto Front Street, heading toward downtown Beaufort, and I kept straight across the grass, keeping my focus on Taylor Creek and the row of Adirondack chairs parked along its bank. The soft wind was a nice change today as it gently brushed my face on its journey crossing over Bogue Banks, the Intracoastal Waterway and Carrot Island. My handy phone app told me it was blowing at 12 miles per hour and coming from the southwest—smart little devil didn't even have to check out the sun or any other tells; it just knew. There were no other people there when I first settled, and I reflexively checked across the water to the Carrot shoreline for horses. Nothing was nosing around the scruff. A passing cloud shaded my eyes and I peered up expecting to identify it. What a funny thought, since I never could and never will get straight what is cumulus and what is Russian or North Korean or some other advancing threat to my well-being.

By now Jean will have picked up her walking pace after plodding along to accommodate my sad knee shuffle. I'm trading the dang thing in for something metal and sturdy in May so I can give her a run for the money. For now, I lurch from one bench or chair to another and keep company with my thoughts. That's not always a good thing since the wild mess that hides in my head can seep out when there is no new voice to divert or distract me. When I can make it to Front Street, I can usually find Scooter or somebody new to tell me stories. Here I just create my own or dwell on something that happened in the past or is going on now and worry about why I can't fix it or change it. That part of the Serenity Prayer, the part that asks for serenity to accept those things I cannot change, has never really worked out for me. At my age there are a lot of changes that could be made. My mind flits from one missed opportunity to the next but never seems to settle on the successes or the wonderful experiences and gifts life has given me.

A squeaky wheel sound drew my attention back over my left shoulder, and I turned to see what was causing the racket. I had to choke back a laugh. An old man was headed toward the chairs and toward me while pushing what looked like a child's baby pram. Inside sat a rheumy-eyed old beagle with a plaid blanket tied around its neck. His tongue was pouring drool onto the blanket like a leaking faucet and one ear was turned inside out. "See 'em yet?" asked the old man. The inside-out ear righted itself as the beagle looked back at the old man, and he sucked his tongue back inside his face when the man slowed his pace. The pair rolled to a stop beside the row of chairs, and I offered an "Afternoon." The two of them squinted in my direction and then two sets of eyes began to dart around in search of something or someone. I had a feeling I wasn't supposed to be here in their private territory. I was an intruder, and they were hoping to find someone else instead. "Howdy," he said. "I didn't see you there in the chairs. Must of been slid down when we rolled up."

We all stayed silent for a few seconds. Seemed like longer before I finally said, "Don't think I've seen you here before." I quickly wished I could grab the words and put them back where they came from. They sounded like a pick-up

line from a singles bar. He didn't seem troubled by them, though, and just said, "Well, Marvin and I don't get out much anymore. He can't walk far before he needs to stop and rest so mostly we stay near the yard."

I asked if it was okay for me to scratch Marvin's head, and he said it was. That perked the hound up a bit so I offered to lift him up and set him on the ground for a walk around. "My name's Rascal," the old guy said. I wondered if he had the two names turned around in his head and he was really Marvin and Rascal was the one getting the free ride. He might have seen the doubt in my eyes so he told me about the name.

"Ever see that old movie 'Cat Ballou' with Lee Marvin? The scene where the stone drunk Lee Marvin character stumbles into a wake with the open casket and wake candles burning. Dumb fool starts singing 'Happy Birthday' and blowing out candles. I had just brought my puppy home when I saw that on the Turner Classic Movies channel, and the dog reminded me of that scene. Didn't want to call him Lee, but Marvin sounded just about right." I had a feeling Rascal was just getting started.

"There was a crazy old coot, never knew his name, lived over behind the Pig several years ago. That was long before the greedy land developers decided to cut down every last tree between here and Live Oak Street and build about a million houses that all look alike. Anyhow, the coot bought himself one of those Kinkajou monkeys and kept him hooked up to a dog collar and a length of sailboat line. They used to walk over here through the trees, and me and Marvin met them one morning. For some strange reason, that dog and that monkey, Darwin was his name, took a liking to each other right away and now Marvin still looks for him whenever we make it down here. Marvin used to let Darwin ride on his back like a circus act. That was something." His face filled with a grin as he recalled some fun days. Marvin actually moved his tail like he remembered when he could wag it. "Bet you never saw anything like that."

As they rolled away, I couldn't find a way to tell him that I had my own memories of those smelly Kinkajou critters. Jean's grandmother, Mrs. Williams, was called MaMa by everybody who knew her, so I did too. MaMa lived alone in a big old house on Main Street in Carrboro. It sported a porch that ran from side to side, and the front door opened into a hallway that ran front to back. She lived in the rooms on the right side, and she was nice enough to rent me a room for a semester or so in the other half of the house. MaMa lived alone there with her dog, a mutt she called Snoopy, and her very own Kinkajou named Sherman. I sometimes went next door to use her phone, and that revolting creep would ride over to me on Snoopy's back, jump up on my back and crawl to my shoulders. Along the way, he sliced me to pieces with his Howard Hughes claws. Being the polite young man who dated MaMa's granddaughter, I sucked it up and smiled. I hated that beast. Felt like I needed a blood transfusion after every phone call.

Jean walked up behind me and said, "I saw three horses. Remember where you got shouted at by the crabby man when we stopped in the golf cart a week or so ago? It was about that same spot. Did you have a nice quiet time?" We started to shuffle on back through the columns. "Do you remember Snoopy and Sherman? You won't believe the story I just heard."