

The Benevolent Barber

A Short Story by Sheri Barile

The Story

Harry Cutter whistled as he switched on the lights in his barbershop and placed the cash drawer in the register. He raised the window shades and turned the sign in the door to read “Open.” Peering out, he saw his first customer of the day pull into the parking lot. It was Lyle Schroeder, who had been coming to Cutter’s Barbershop for nearly 30 years. Harry watched as he emerged from the sedan and then opened the rear door to retrieve something from the back seat. It was a large basket.



“Uh-oh,” Harry said to himself. “That’s gonna be Nellie’s jam.”

It was no secret around town that Nellie Schroeder’s homemade strawberry jam had a distinct aftertaste that left some who had sampled it believing it might be highly combustible. In fact, the only residents of Rockwell Corners’ modest population that didn’t seem to be aware of it were Lyle and Nellie Schroeder—Nellie because she was a little too close to the annual jam-making project, and Lyle because he was allergic to strawberries and, therefore, had never tasted it.

A small bell tinkled as Harry opened the door for his friend. That’s how Harry thought of Lyle. It’s how he thought of all his customers. And as a friend, Harry had invited the Schroeders to display and sell their jam out of his shop for the past 11 years.

“Morning, Harry,” Lyle said, as he stepped into the shop. “My better half brewed up her summer batch. Should I put it by the register, as usual?”

“Sure thing,” Harry said. “Will you be needing a trim this morning?”

“You bet,” Lyle answered, removing a cap and giving his head a quick rub. “Nellie says I’m shaggy.”

Harry withdrew an empty tip jar from a shelf beneath the cash register and placed it on the counter next to the jam. Based upon past experience, he predicted the jar would contain a bounty by the end of the day. Once his customers saw the jam, they always chipped in generously. No one had the heart to tell Lyle that his wife’s jam tasted like kerosene, and no one wanted to purchase it. So, once it became clear to Harry several years back that the jam’s distinctive flavor had not been a novice fluke, he began to fill the Schroeder coffer out of his own pocket and then systematically dispose of every last jar.

In the barber’s chair, Lyle embarked on one of his trademark stories. His tales were usually quite colorful, and even if Harry wound up funding every last jar of kerosene in that basket on his own, he considered himself compensated. The conversation started when Harry asked Lyle how his daughter, Kim, was doing. Kim was a video producer in Grand Rapids and seemed to have a lot of interesting experiences on the job.

“Oh, she had a crazy one last week,” Lyle said. “Seems she was shooting this commercial for a restaurant up there that has a pond on the grounds, complete with a pair of swans. Very romantic atmosphere. So she wanted to get a shot of this couple dining near the window overlooking the pond, but the grounds by the shore were messy. So she goes out there with a rake to start tidying things up.”

Harry interrupted. “She can’t staff that out to her crew?”

“You know Kim,” Lyle said. “She’s a team player. Anyway, she’s got her head down just raking away and all of the sudden she feels something hit her in the thigh—hard. Said it felt like a golf ball had hit her. She turns and sees this big swan with its wings out, flapping away. He charged and hit her again with his beak.”

“You’re kidding! What did she do?”

“Well, I told her she should have swung the rake at it, but she said she dropped the rake and took off running,” Lyle said. “That swan chased her all the way up to the restaurant and onto the deck. Good thing her cameraman was near the window. He’d seen the whole thing and opened a door for her. She said she thought the swan was going to chase her right into the dining room.”

Harry laughed. “I guess that swan was pretty honked off!” “Honked off,” Lyle said, chuckling. “That’s a good one.”

Harry finished up the trim and Lyle paid him. As he was about to leave, he stuffed a \$5 bill into the tip jar. Little did he know, he had just purchased the first two jars of his wife’s strawberry jam.

Harry was still sweeping up the floor when customer number two arrived. It was Gary Mitchell, and he was no more empty-handed than Lyle had been. He carried a paper bag in one hand and a small pet crate in the other, and when he came into the shop, Harry could see there were three kittens in the crate.

“What have we here?” Harry asked.

“Well, you know Mom still has that barn cat, and they can’t really afford to spay her,” Gary said. “She had another litter in June, and Mom brought them into the house a few weeks ago to fully wean them and get them litter trained. I was hoping some of your customers might want a kitten.”

Harry already had a cat at home that Gary had brought in from his mother’s barn two years ago. Others from that litter had gone to the good homes of customers. It had worked out fine once before, so the benevolent barber watched as Gary put the crate down and set out some clean litter and a couple of small saucers.

“Do they have names?” Harry asked.

“Yes, temporary names. This here is Oops,” Gary said, pointing to one. “And that little guy is Uh-oh, and this is Not-Again,” he said of the remaining two.

Harry chuckled. “Oops, Uh-oh, and Not Again. Very clever. The customers will love that. So how about a trim?”

“Believe it or not, that’s why I came in.”

Gary took a seat, and Harry asked him how his dad was doing. Tom Mitchell had been one of his very first customers when he'd opened Cutter's in the early 1980s and had started bringing Gary in for haircuts when he was a youngster.

"Oh, you'll get a kick out of this," Gary said. "Here's Thomas Mitchell's latest misadventure."

He went on to tell a story about how his dad and mom had driven to Mount Pleasant for his sister Ellie's surprise birthday party. Ellie's husband had taken her out to dinner, and all the guests gathered at their home, where they would surprise her when she returned.

"They went over in Dad's beat up ol' truck, and Ellie would have recognized it if it were parked at the house," he said. "So the plan was for Dad to park it at Ellie's church just a couple of blocks away until after the surprise. Well, he drops Mom off at the house, takes the truck to the church and walks back. But when he gets to the neighborhood, he walks into the wrong house!"

"You're kidding," Harry said. "How'd he manage that?"

"Well, there are three Cape Cods on that street. They're similar, but they don't look exactly alike. And Ellie's is the only one with a fenced-in front yard, so it's surprising that he missed it. Anyway, he walks into this neighbor's house and there are two teenage girls he doesn't recognize. But he figures it's a surprise party, so he's not going to know everyone. He says to them, 'Wow, they've changed the furniture arrangement in here,' and then he goes to the stove where there's this big pot of pulled pork simmering in barbecue sauce. He lifts the lid, takes a whiff and says 'Mmmm, that smells delicious!' Then he goes to the fridge and grabs a beer."

Harry laughed so hard he could barely catch his breath. He freed up a hand to dab tears from his eyes with a hankie and then asked, "How long did it take him to figure out he was in the wrong house?"

"Not long. He asked the girls where everyone was, and he said they just looked at him, wide-eyed. They start backing away from him and hollering for their father. The father comes upstairs from the basement, looks at Dad, and says, 'Can I help you?'"

"That is hilarious," Harry said, still laughing.

"Classic Tom Mitchell," Gary agreed, raking his fingers through freshly trimmed hair. "Looks good, Harry. Thanks."

At the cashier counter, Gary noticed the basket of jam. "I see Lyle has been here," he said. "Hey, if you don't mind, I'll take a few jars."

Harry looked at him with surprise, and Gary offered an explanation. "The wife is going to grill up some burgers for dinner tonight and I could use this to get the charcoal started." He nearly roared at his own joke. Then he looked at Harry sheepishly and added a \$10 bill to the tip jar.

As Gary left, Maggie Peterson came in with her two sons, Jason and Kyle. They had barely stepped inside when the younger boy, Kyle cried, "Kittens!" Both boys made a beeline for the crate.

"Are they for sale?" Jason asked.

"They are free to a good home," Harry said. Then he introduced the kittens by their names. "Those are weird names," Kyle said.

“They are rather silly,” Harry agreed. “But anyone who takes a kitten home can change its name to anything they like.”

“Mom,” both boys whined in unison, “can we take a kitty home?”

Maggie looked at Harry, helplessly, and Harry just shrugged. “Well, we have been talking about getting a family pet,” she said. “Which one do you boys like?”

“I like this one,” Kyle said, petting the one named Oops.

“No, this one,” Jason said, lifting the one named Uh-oh out of the crate. Then he looked at his mom and said, “Can we please have them both—one for Kyle and one for me?”

“I’ll think about it while you’re having your hair cut,” she said. “Now scoot up into that chair.” While Jason got his trim and Kyle played with the kittens, Maggie slipped into the shop restroom, something she made a habit of doing each time she brought her sons into Cutter’s. It started about a year ago, when Kyle, who wasn’t quite four at the time, emerged from the bathroom after using it and loudly protested that the toilet was too hairy. Maggie had felt her face flush with embarrassment in that moment, and when she looked at Harry, he’d just chuckled. Then, with remarkable grace, he had explained to Kyle that since it was a barbershop, there was always hair everywhere.

Maggie vowed that day that she would go into the restroom and tidy up for Harry each time she came in. She discretely brought in some cleaning supplies and found a place to store them, and she also shared her plan with her three sisters living in Rockwell Corners. The women made it a point to space out their visits to the shop over the month, and between the four of them, they kept Harry’s toilet neat as a pin.

She finished and returned to her sons to find Harry asking Jason about his Little League season.

“Spring season is over, but if we can find a sponsor, our team is going to do fall ball this year,” Jason said.

“Suppose I sponsor your team,” Harry said. “Would I get to have my name on the uniform shirts?” “Sure,” Jason said. “It would say ‘Cutter’s Barbershop’ right on the back of the shirt.”

“Well, you got yourself a sponsor,” Harry said. “Tell your coach.”

Kyle, who was cradling a kitten said, “Hey, Cutter—that’s a good name for this little guy. Can we have them, Mom? Please?”

“All right, boys,” she said. “Pick the two you want.”

The bell on the door tinkled, and Dr. Carl Weaver walked in. He was Rockwell Corner’s only veterinarian, and his office was just across the parking lot from Cutter’s.

“Carl,” Harry said, “is it that time again?”

The vet was quite bald on top, and he gave his smooth head a rub. “Yeah, I need you to take this shine down a bit,” he said. Then, looking at Kyle he added, “The glare is scaring all the critters.”

Kyle giggled, and then said, “We’re getting kittens!”

“Well, be sure you bring them in to see me,” Carl replied, giving Maggie a wink. Then to Harry he said, “Let me guess—Tom and Linda Mitchell?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “That barn cat’s dance card has been pretty full.”

“You know, I’d be happy to provide a complimentary fix for that cat,” he said. “I know that with your help they are trying to get the kittens domesticated and into homes, but feral cats are a problem, and the county shelter is overburdened. Do you have a number for the Mitchells? I’ll call them and make the offer.”

“That’s very kind,” Harry said. “I’ll get the number for you before you leave.”

The afternoon passed, and by the time the benevolent barber turned the sign in the door to read “Closed,” he had trimmed up a dozen heads, placed two kittens, gotten his bathroom cleaned, sampled a couple of homemade peanut butter cookies a customer brought in, sponsored a Little League team, and paved the way for a much-needed feline procedure. It was only Tuesday, and already his week had been full.

He counted the money in the tip jar, which totaled \$65. That covered all two-dozen jars of jam with \$5 to spare. He set it aside for the Schroeders and then grabbed a few jars to take home. His wife, Dottie, would gladly dispose of them.

Harry pulled the window shades, switched off the lights, and collected the crate containing the last kitten. He locked up his shop and headed home.

As he walked through the door into his kitchen, a loud meow sounded. Dottie turned her attention from the cutting board, where she was preparing that evening’s dinner salad, to the crate.

“Oh Harry,” she said. “Not again!”

Harry lifted the crate to his face and peered into it. “Hey, she knows your name,” he said to the tabby. “I guess you’ve found your home.”

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