

Miss Martha and Peaches

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By Doug Cogburn

The Angel was going about his usual activities when he was approached by the Archangel with an assignment.

“You’re being sent to Earth,” the Archangel told him, “There’s a special work that will need to be done there.”

“What will I be doing?”

“There’s a woman who will be lonely in a few years when her husband comes home. You’ll help her.”

“How will I do that?”

“You’ll realize that when the time is right. All you need to know right now is that you’ll be on Earth as one of its creatures and you’ll not even remember that you’re an angel until it’s time for you to return. You will do a fine job.”

Before he could ask any other questions, the angel was on the Earth, in the middle of a squirming and yelping litter of puppies. The last thing he thought, before he forgot where he’d come from and started squirming and yelping with his new brothers and sisters was, “Imagine that, I’m a puppy dog!”

Once upon a time there were three little girls, Jessica, who was twelve; Lillie, who was eight; and Lydia, who was six. They lived with their Mom and Dad in an old farmhouse that used to be in the country but was now in the city. They had a big yard filled with birds and squirrels and rabbits and a dog named Spice T. Dog and a cat named White Socks T. Cat.

They had moved into the big house when Jessica was two years old and the only child around. One of their neighbors who lived along the highway was an old woman named Miss Martha Pierce. She went to church where Mom had gone to church, and she was excited to have the family move close to her. She was rather old, so one of her neighbors stayed with her some and tried to help her out. This neighbor was another

Miss Martha, in this case Miss Martha Spears. She lived in the little block house across the road from the farmhouse in the city and she was by herself. Her children and grandchildren lived away in different states and her family was in Rogersville. Her husband of many years, Daddy Joe Spears, had died shortly before the family moved into the community.

Mom and Dad and Jessica met Miss Martha Spears through Martha Pierce and Jessica and Miss Martha became good buddies and Miss Martha called Jessica her Little Sugarfoot.

In fact, Miss Martha adopted all the family and called them her own. Jessica would come and visit Miss Martha every day as soon as she was deemed old enough to cross the road by herself. If she didn't get over to visit for a few days, Miss Martha would be calling and wanting to know where her baby was. Jessica and her family gave Miss Martha someone to look after now that she lived alone.

Alone, that is, except for her dog named Peaches. Peaches was a black and white mixed dog with long scruffy hair who lived inside and wasn't allowed outside very often. Peaches didn't like children because some children had been mean to him when he was little, so he didn't like Jessica climbing on his back and patting him and crawling all over him like she did her own big dog named Bear. Miss Martha was constantly fussing at Peaches to be nice to Jessica and fussing as Jessica to stay away from Peaches and telling Peaches how much trouble he was and what a spoiled baby he'd become.

Peaches had shown up at Miss Martha's right after Daddy Joe died. He'd lived in the neighborhood already but had walked over to her door one day and never left. Jessica might be Miss Martha's baby, but Peaches was her best friend. She talked to Peaches and fretted over him and petted him when he came over and lay his head in her lap and looked up at her for attention. She didn't know why Peaches had decided to move in and complained about having to take care of him, but she also said that he

was a blessing and a comfort and helped her get through the lonely days without Daddy Joe.

As Jessica and Peaches grew older Lillie and then Lydia came along, and Miss Martha was delighted to have even more grandchildren living next door. Jessica and Peaches didn't like to share the attention, but Miss Martha had plenty to go around.

The first stop the babies made when they came home from the hospital was to go to Miss Martha's and Peach's and as they grew up they too started going there nearly every day. Whenever the children couldn't be found, Mom and Dad would whistle for Spice T. Dog to see if he came running from Miss Martha's house. Spice always went with the children to make sure they stayed out of trouble. Mom and Dad checked with Spice first, because if they were to call Miss Martha and the children weren't there, then she'd fuss and worry and fret until the missing babies were found.

That was what happened when Lillie and Lydia were in preschool and Jessica had started to real school and needed somewhere to go when she rode the bus home. She did get off and stay with Miss Martha, but one day she had somewhere else to go and Mom forgot to let Miss Martha know. When Jessica didn't come running off the bus Miss Martha just knew that disaster had struck and she called the Nannys and Papaws to find the missing child and sent Peaches to check at the big house and called her daughter in South Carolina and probably would have called the police and FBI if Jessica and her Mom hadn't gotten home from their errand. It took about three days for Mom to make amends with Miss Martha, who said that she'd nearly had a spell. "Lord, younguns, don't ever do that to me again! I'm not too old to keep her, but I'm too old for that excitement! I didn't know what had happened to that youngun! I didn't know if she'd got lost or got stole or where she was!"

After hearing from the Nannys and Papaws and Miss Martha's daughter and half the other people that Miss Martha knew about "The Spell", Mom and Dad decided that they'd imposed on her enough and would make other arrangements for Jessica's daily afterschool care. They told Miss Martha that it wasn't fair for her to be tied down every day waiting on Jessica. They told each other that they didn't know if Miss Martha could go through another spell like that and even if she could they certainly didn't want to.

Mom enjoyed visiting with Miss Martha, as long as she didn't talk about "The spell". Miss Martha would tell her stories about her growing up and her life with Daddy Joe and when the kids were little. Miss Martha used to write little stories and poems until she had a brain tumor and couldn't seem to write anymore. But she still enjoyed painting, and would paint flowers and trees on empty aspirin bottles and other little plastic bottles and the children would often bring home the latest one that she'd painted for them.

Dad went over to Miss Martha's, but not as often as Mom. He usually visited when he was sent for to plow up a little spot for some tomatoes where she and Daddy Joe used to have their garden, to check on something leaking or not working right, or for advice on some piece of mail. When he couldn't figure it out, Papaw Cogburn was sent for to add his assistance or opinion. Papaw Cogburn liked Miss Martha and liked to help her out. One time her plumbing was clogged up and she was afraid that it would cost too much to get it fixed. Papaw paid for over half the bill and told Dad and the plumber not to tell and just let Miss Martha that she'd happened to need the plumber just when he was having a special sale.

Miss Martha got quite a jolt a year or two later when she needed a plumber again and called without letting Dad or Papaw know about it. She couldn't get over how the man's rates had more than doubled in just a

year. Dad and Papaw looked at each other and told her that everything was getting more expensive.

Dad had a habit of telling Miss Martha little stories like that. He tried to tell the children that there was a difference between lying to the woman and just not telling everything that he knew. He knew that some of the things she'd ask him or Mom to pick up at the store cost more than the money she'd sent, but you don't have to tell everything. He knew who mowed her yard and raked her leaves when she was gone on a trip, but you don't have to tell everything. He knew that he forgot to cash the checks she wrote him to try to pay for little jobs that he did, but you don't have to tell everything.

When Lillie was still very small, Miss Martha wanted to visit her daughter in South Carolina. She asked Dad if they were planning on going to the beach on vacation and if they were, could she ride as far as Hunter and Patsy's. She didn't want him to make a special trip, but if they were going it was on the way. He said that they had indeed talked about going to the beach that year. A few weeks later all the family and Miss Martha loaded up in the old gray van and headed to South Carolina. For some reason, Peaches didn't go on this trip. They got to Hunter and Patsy's and spent a night or two with them to see the nearby sights before they went on to the beach. The morning they were leaving, Miss Martha slipped a ten dollar bill to help pay for the gas on their way to the beach. Dad slipped it back in her suitcase before they left. Miss Martha and Patsy told them how much they appreciated the ride and Hunter gave Dad directions on how to get to the beach. Then the family loaded up in the old gray van and headed back to Greeneville. Dad told Jessica, "You don't have to tell everything you know."

Usually Miss Martha didn't travel without Peaches since he was such good company. Every now and then Miss Martha and Peaches would go home with one of her children when they came to visit. She'd stay a few

days or weeks, but would soon have to come back home so she could see her other younguns.

Lillie liked to go to Miss Martha's and eat snacks and help Miss Martha play with her baby dolls. They had them all named and Miss Martha named Lillie "Little Britchies". They'd dress them and take care of them and put them down for their naps. Miss Martha also had a display cabinet was the home of several other dolls. Blossom and Rebeccah lived upstairs, while the downstairs was occupied by Mrs. And Mrs. Applehead and their children: Mary Lida, Pansy, and Gabv. Lydia would especially miss Miss Martha when she was gone because Lydia went over there every day after school for her snack of Cheerios. Miss Martha called her the Cheerio Kid.

As Miss Martha got older she got sicker and had more things go wrong with her and she spent more time with her daughter. It was always a thrill when Miss Martha would come home for a visit, and all three children would go running over there to see her and give her presents even though Mom and Dad tried to tell them to let Miss Martha rest up from her trip first.

On one trip home, Miss Martha and Patsy revealed that they had a problem. The Doctor said that Miss Martha should live by herself anymore and that she needed to live with somebody or in an apartment for older people. They'd found an apartment in South Carolina where Patsy and Hunter lived, but Miss Martha was worried about being so far away from the babies and she couldn't take Peaches with her. Mom and Dad told her that she needed to think about herself and not the children and that they could come and visit and she could come back to see them. The children all cried but told her that they wanted her to be well and to do what was best for her.

That being settled still left the problem of Peaches. Peaches heard them talking and knew that he was in the way of Miss Martha staying well.

He'd always taken care of Miss Martha and didn't want to be a bother. As he lay on his rug that night he thought and thought about how he could help take care of her now. He knew that he'd have to do something, and he finally decided that he would have to die. That way Miss Martha wouldn't have to worry about him and she could move to the apartment and be taken care of. As he was thinking of this, the room was filled with a bright light, and the Archangel was standing there.

"I told you that you'd do a fine job," the Archangel told Peaches, "but now your work here is done and its time for you to go back to being an angel again." As the two angels flew off they looked down at Miss Martha. They knew she'd enjoy her apartment once she got settled in.

The next morning Patsy called to tell Mom that Miss Martha was going to the apartment to live and that everyone would have to come see her. They'd be leaving as soon as Hunter buried Peaches.

Miss Martha and the family kept in touch with letters and phone calls. One year they went there on vacation and each child got to spend a day with Miss Martha at her apartment. The first night they got there was Miss Martha's birthday, so they took her out to eat at a steakhouse Dad had read about. Dad told Miss Martha and Patsy to get whatever they wanted, and they sat with the children at one table and ate onion rings and hamburgers and drank root beer out of the bottle.

Miss Martha was surprised and impressed that they'd planned their trip to arrive for her birthday present. Actually, Mom and Dad were just as surprised to learn it was her birthday, but they didn't tell her that. As they were leaving, Miss Martha tried to pay for her supper, but Dad wouldn't allow it. Jessica told Dad later that Miss Martha told her, "Why, supper in a fancy steakhouse for seven people, I bet that cost him a good twenty or twenty-five dollars." Dad said that he imagined Miss Martha didn't get out much, and he reminded Jessica that you don't have to tell everything you know.

When Patsy brought Miss Martha home to visit that Christmas of 1997 she was anxious to see the children. Miss Martha had tried to teach Jessica to quilt, but they hadn't gotten past the first few blocks before Jessica would get bored. She hadn't had much more luck with Lillie, and Lydia was mainly interested in Cheerios. Miss Martha had taken the few quilt blocks they had sown and finished out quilts for all three girls. She thought that they'd put them in their hope chests, but the girls decided to use them right away.

She also brought news that was particularly distressing to Jessica. She was considering selling the little block house across the street. Jessica thought this was a terrible idea because then it wouldn't be Miss Martha's house anymore. Mom and Dad tried to tell her that they could go visit Miss Martha in South Carolina and she could stop by when she came to Tennessee to visit family, but Jessica wasn't satisfied. "It won't be the same! It won't be her house anymore! I want things to stay the same!"

Miss Martha wasn't too sure about the idea either, and it took a few more trips back to the little block house to take more stuff to the apartment before she felt comfortable enough to put the house on the market. The Archangel and angel visited her often during this time. The Archangel would help her remember Daddy Joe and feel like he was close to her and the angel would help her feel like Peaches was nearby too. Finally she'd moved enough stuff and the Archangel and angel had moved enough memories that the apartment became her new home and she told her children to sell the little block house because it didn't seem like home anymore.

Miss Martha still gets her phone calls on Christmas and Thanksgiving and often on special occasions from the children and she sends letters to each of them and they write back. She still paints her bottles, has taken up making clay figurines and selling them at a local shop, and just the other day sent in a story to "Reader's Digest." There's

usually a story behind the clay figurines she makes and she'll write it out on the sketch she makes first. She enjoys her new home and her new neighbors, but she still misses her babies and keeps a box of Cheerios on hand just in case Lydia drops by someday.

The little block house was sold to a nice couple from out of state. Jessica said that was all right since Miss Martha would get the money, but they'd better not tear it down. She looks suspiciously across the road whenever they start working on it or making any changes. Mom went to visit them and take them jelly and fresh bread like she does all the neighbors. She told them about Miss Martha and how much the children miss her; so they weren't too surprised the day there was knock at their door, and there stood Lydia, waiting to ask them if they had any Cheerios.