

Retired

By Cynthia Rylant



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Her name was Miss Phala Cutcheon and she used to be a schoolteacher. Miss Cutcheon had gotten old and had retired from teaching fourth grade, so now she simply sat on her porch and considered things. She considered

moving to Florida. She considered joining a club for old people and learning to play cards. She considered dying.

Finally, she just got a dog.

The dog was old. And she, too, was retired. A retired collie. She had belonged to a family who lived around the corner from Miss Cutcheon. The dog had helped raise three children, and she had been loved. But the family was moving to France and could not take their beloved pet. They gave her to Miss Cutcheon.

When she lived with the family, the dog's name had been Princess.

Miss Cutcheon, however, thought the name much too delicate for a dog as old and bony as Miss Cutcheon herself, and she changed it to Velma. It took Princess several days to figure out what Miss Cutcheon meant when she called out for someone named Velma.

In time, though, Velma got used to her new name. She got used to Miss Cutcheon's slow pace —so unlike the romping of three children —and she got used to Miss Cutcheon's dry dog food. She learned not to mind the smell of burning asthmador, which helped

Miss Cutcheon breathe better, and not to mind the sound of the old lady's wheezing and snoring in the middle of the night. Velma missed her children, but she was all right.

Miss Cutcheon was a very early riser (a habit that could not be broken after forty-three years of meeting children at the schoolhouse door), and she enjoyed big breakfasts. Each day Miss Cutcheon would creak out of her bed like a mummy rising from its tomb, then shuffle into the kitchen, straight for the coffee pot. Velma, who slept on the floor

at the end of Miss Cutcheon's bed, would soon creak off the floor herself and head into the kitchen. Velma's family had eaten cold cereal breakfasts all those years, and only when she came to live with Miss Cutcheon did Velma realize what perking coffee, sizzling bacon and hot biscuits smell like. She still got only dry dog food, but the aromas around her nose made the chunks taste ten times better.

Miss Cutcheon sat at her dinette table, eating her bacon and eggs and biscuits, sipping her coffee, while Velma lay under the table at her feet. Miss Cutcheon

spent most of breakfast time thinking about all the children she had taught. Velma thought about hers.

During the day Miss Cutcheon took Velma for walks up and down the block. The two of them became a familiar sight. On warm, sunny days they took many walks, moving at an almost brisk pace up and back. But on damp, cold days they eased themselves along the sidewalk as if they'd both just gotten out of bed, and they usually went only a half-block, morning and afternoon.

Miss Cutcheon and Velma

spent several months together like this: eating breakfast together, walking the block, sitting on the front porch, going to bed early. Velma's memory of her three children grew fuzzy, and only when she saw a boy or girl passing on the street did her ears prick up as if she *should* have known something about children. But what it was she had forgotten.

Miss Cutcheon's memory, on the other hand, grew better every day, and she seemed not to know anything except the past. She could recite the names of children in her mind—which seats they

had sat in, what subjects they were best at, what they'd brought to school for lunch. She could remember their funny ways, and sometimes she would be sitting at her dinette in the morning, quietly eating, when she would burst out with a laugh that filled the room and made Velma jump.

Why Miss Cutcheon decided one day to walk Velma a few blocks farther, and to the west, is a puzzle. But one warm morning in September, they did walk that way, and when they reached the third block, a sound like a million tiny buzz saws floated into the air.

Velma's ears stood straight up, and Miss Cutcheon stopped and considered. Then they went a block farther, and the sound changed to something like a hundred bells pealing. Velma's tail began to wag ever so slightly. Finally, in the fifth block, they saw the school playground.

Children, small and large, ran wildly about, screaming, laughing, falling down, climbing up, jumping, dancing. Velma started barking, again and again and again. She couldn't contain herself. She barked and wagged and forgot all about Miss Cutcheon standing

there with her. She saw only the children and it made her happy.

Miss Cutcheon stood very stiff a while, staring. She didn't smile. She simply looked at the playground, the red brick school, the chain-link fence that protected it all, keeping intruders outside, keeping children inside. Miss Cutcheon just stared while Velma barked. Then they walked back home.

But the next day they returned. They moved farther along the fence, nearer where the children were. Velma barked and wagged until two boys, who had been

seesawing, ran over to the fence to try to pet the dog. Miss Cutcheon pulled back on the leash, but too late, for Velma had already leaped up against the wire. She poked her snout through a hole and the boys scratched it, laughing as she licked their fingers. More children came to the fence, and while some rubbed Velma's nose, others questioned Miss Cutcheon: "What's your dog's name?" "Will it bite?" "Do you like cats?" Miss Cutcheon, who had not answered the questions of children in what seemed a very long time, replied

as a teacher would.

Every day, in good weather, Miss Cutcheon and Velma visited the playground fence. The children learned their names, and Miss Cutcheon soon knew the children who stroked Velma the way she had known her own fourth-graders years ago. In bad weather, Miss Cutcheon and Velma stayed inside, breathing the asthmadora, feeling warm and comfortable, thinking about the children at the playground. But on a nice day, they were out again.

In mid-October, Miss Cutcheon put a pumpkin on her

front porch, something she hadn't done in years. And on Halloween night, she turned on the porch light, and she and Velma waited at the door. Miss Cutcheon passed out fifty-six chocolate bars before the evening was done.

Then, on Christmas Eve of that same year, a large group of young carolers came to sing in front of Miss Cutcheon's house; and they were bearing gifts of dog biscuits and sweet fruit.