

Moose Mauler Finds His Calling

by Robert McKnight, DSPE

Editor's note: This is part 4 in a series of connected stories. Part 1, "Shorty and the Professor," and part 2, "Shorty's Wonderful Idea," both appeared in *Telicom* 30, No. 4; and part 3, "Marge Grooten Makes Big Plans," appeared in *Telicom* 31, No. 4.



(Illustration by Nicole Kendrick)

Several times a week, Moose Mauler would have to drive his old flatbed diesel past “the corners” where he would see Marge Grooten’s new shops and library. Every time he did, he felt a small measure of the kind of relief enjoyed by some lucky survivor who had barely managed to escape

a life-threatening catastrophe. But, mostly, he felt envy. How come Marge Grooten got a brand-new place, more than twice the size of the old one, while he was still driving around this crummy old truck? How come that insurance man, what’s his name, had practically threatened him over

the measly claim of a few hundred bucks and, yet, had not thought twice about writing Marge a check for fifty times what her lousy building was worth? How much longer could he keep this old bucket of bolts running? When it came to that, his other vehicle—his twelve-year-old sports pickup—could use a ring job. Why couldn't someone have wrecked something on the Mauler ranch? The old barn was right next to the highway. If only someone had driven a big rig through that worthless eyesore. If those insurance company crooks would pay off on his barn like they did on Marge's cluster of lean-to shacks, he could buy that nearly new GMC that Junior Broadridge is trying to sell.

One night, while he was at Ed's Tavern with Jack Brandt, the idea of the wrecked barn resurfaced in Moose's mind, and it occurred to him that Jack and his old Peterbilt might be just the right means to that end.

Moose said, "Hey, Jack. You get over to the corners every once in a while. Have you seen Marge Grooten's new, fancy place?"

"Oh, yeah."

"It burns me up that she has all the luck. It could have been the barn at my place that was wrecked, not Marge's lousy string of cracker boxes."

"Yeah."

"I was wonderin', Jack. What if some night, soon, you just happened to be drivin' past my place and just happened to veer off the highway and plow through the barn? I could be here at Ed's or someplace with witnesses, so everyone would think it was just an accident. When I collected on the insurance, I could give you a couple of hundred bucks."

"Yeah, I bet you could. That's the worst idea you ever had, Moose. Are you losin' it?"

"Now, wait a minute, Jack. No one will ever suspect you. If you do it after midnight, the highway will be deserted. Ma is so deaf, she won't hear a thing. Without witnesses, why would anyone think that you did it?"

"Look, Moose. Whoever the idiot was who drove through Marge's old place has ruined things for everybody. The insurance company would really be suspicious. And the sheriff would claim to have a crime wave on his hands. No one ever will be as lucky as that moron at the corners."

"You're a gutless wonder, Jack. And don't go callin' the guy who wrecked Marge's place stupid. He was smart enough to get away with it, wasn't he?"

"Don't get all huffy, Moose. You would think that *you* did it. Wait a minute! The mornin' after Marge's place was wrecked, you called, claimin' that your truck was down, didn't you? I bet you smashed it up by drivin' it through Marge's buildings."

"Well, maybe I did. I figure that whoever did it did her a favor. That place of hers was a shambles, and now she's got something brand new and more than twice the size."

"Well, I'll be darned. You *did* do it. What happened? Did you get looped and run off the road? Or were you mad at Marge for some reason?"

"Not so loud, Jack. I don't want any of the losers in this hole in the wall to get any ideas."

Although the subject of the conversation was changed, and neither Marge's place nor any insurance settlement was mentioned again that night at Ed's, Jack remembered Moose's near confession a couple of nights later while having a few with some of his east-side-of-the-valley buddies at The Willows over where the highway intersects Plum Road. The way Jack told the story that night at The Willows, there was no

longer any doubt that Moose was the one who had destroyed Marge's old place. In the days that followed, the story spread, by word of mouth, from Jack's cronies on the valley's east side to all parts of the valley, eventually reaching the corners on the west side.

Mrs. Wilton heard it first from Thelma Gridley, who told the story to her while in the Post Office for her mail. Mrs. Wilton told Marge, who told the Professor when he came into the library to tutor the Mason twins. That night in the boxcar, while the Professor and Shorty were eating supper of roasted garlic chicken, curried rice, asparagus with Melbourne sauce, freshly baked crescent rolls, avocado/artichoke heart salad, and double-chocolate, peach downside-up cake, the Professor told the story to Shorty.

Shorty, who had studied the wreckage of Marge's shops and library before hauling it all off to the dump, said, "Well, if it was Moose who done it, then he must have done it while drivin' that big, old, rusty diesel of his."

"Why's that, Shorty?" asked the Professor.

"Well, for one thing," answered Shorty, "it would take somethin' that big to do that much damage; and, for another thing, it couldn't have been Moose's red pickup. None of the smashed wallboards had any red paint on 'em."

On Thursday afternoon as the Professor was about to enter the library to do his tutoring, he happened to notice Moose's old diesel parked across the highway in front of the feedstore. The Professor crossed the road and examined the front of Moose's truck. It obviously had never been washed since the Maulers had owned it, and it showed signs of decades of unrepaired, minor impacts with all kinds of obstacles. But it didn't take the trained eye of a forensic expert to spot, embedded in the surface of the rusty metal, the flecks of apple-green paint that Marge had used throughout the interior of her old shops and library. Even more obvious was at least a

half of a cup of what was surely peach-blossom honey filling many of the honeycomb-like cells of the old truck's exposed radiator. The Professor remembered that nearly all of Marge's stock of locally produced honey had been smashed during the destruction, and it was clear that the deposit of honey was fairly new, since it overlaid most of the yellow jackets and other insects wedged within the pores of the radiator.

"Hey, Professor. What's goin' on?" asked Moose as he came out of the feedstore with a sack of fertilizer over each shoulder. "Isn't this a day that you help the kids over at the library?"

"Yes, it is, Moose," replied the Professor. "And, if you don't mind, I'd like to help *you* with some advice."

"What's that, Professor?"

"As soon as you get home—and that should be as soon as you can—take the hose and a stiff brush to the front of this truck. If the sheriff ever gets a look at this thing, he'll have you trying to answer more questions than any of my students are asked on an examination day."

Moose gave the Professor a puzzled look and then turned his head to look at his truck. He hadn't really looked at it for years and, at first, was only struck by its ugliness. Gradually, though, his eyes fixed on the chips of green paint and the honey, and his eyebrows slowly rose in recognition of the obviousness of the evidence. He shot the Professor another puzzled look, dumped the fertilizer onto the bed of the truck, climbed into its cab, started its engine, said, "I get your drift, Professor," and drove away in the direction of the Mauler ranch.

Later, while scrubbing away everything that was removable from the front of his truck, Moose began to wonder what the Professor could be thinking: *The Professor must have been playin' detective. He saw all the stuff from Marge's shops stuck to the truck. Would he go to the sheriff? No.*

If so, he wouldn't have advised washin' away the evidence. Would he try pullin' a shakedown? No. Again, he would want to preserve the evidence, not destroy it. Well, what, then? The Professor is always helpin' the kids with their schoolwork. Maybe he is just one of those people who get a boot out of helpin' folks. Maybe he wouldn't want to see me get into trouble. Maybe he would want to see me get ahead! I wonder if he would help with this barn-wreckin' business. Maybe he could get Shorty to knock the barn down. I'd have to loan Shorty the diesel. His truck isn't big enough to do the job right.

In the next day or two, Moose would, now and then, think about the likelihood that the Professor could be persuaded to help wreck the barn. Somehow, the more times he considered it, the more likely it seemed. By Monday morning, he had himself convinced that the Professor would be eager to take part in a fraud, so he got in his pickup and drove to Mr. Rankin's peach orchard and then down the graveled truck track that ran between two rows of trees to the small clearing where Shorty's caboose and the Professor's boxcar stood. Shorty was away building a new henhouse at the Stoffer ranch, but the Professor was at home tending to his latest plantings of pole beans.

"Howdy doo, Professor. I washed off the diesel like you said." Moose climbed out of the pickup.

"Good idea, Moose. What brings you here?"

"Well, I was wonderin' if you and Shorty could help me with a small problem."

"What's that?"

"Well, you see, I need to have my barn wrecked, but I can't do it myself because the insurance company wouldn't pay off if I did. So, I figure that I could lend Shorty the use of the diesel some night, and he could drive it through the barn a couple of times to smash it down real good. Me and you could be playin' cards or somethin' here

at the boxcar so we would have an alibi. We would tell everybody that Shorty was here all the time. When I got the insurance money, I could buy Junior Broadridge's GMC."

"Hold on here, Moose! Do you know what you're saying? That kind of caper could get you fifteen years as a guest of the state. Whatever made you hatch such a scheme?"

"Well, Marge Grooten got a brand-new place. The idea for the barn is the same except I would get a new truck."

"Yes, Moose, I see the similarities. And so would the sheriff and Mr. Litterall at the insurance company. I want you to forget this crazy idea and forget it fast. If you're strapped for cash, there's got to be a legal way. I'll try to think of something. You go home now and wash this pickup, or whatever, and leave crime to those with more sen— ... er, with more ... ah ... aptitude."

That night, the Professor told Shorty about Moose's visit.

"You know, Perfessor, there ain't much use at the Mauler ranch for a barn anymore."

"How's that, Shorty?"

"Well, in the olden days when the ranches were worked by a horse team and all the ranchers kept livestock and stored feed, these old barns had a proper use. Now they're just places for the field mice to go when it rains."

"So, how does that help Moose?"

"I don't know, Perfessor. Maybe he could do what the Stoffers did with their old barn."

"What was that?"

"They had a builder from town—Mark Coleman is his name—come out and tear it down for its

lumber. He uses it in fancy antique shops and places like that. He paid them a good price, too.”

“Oh, yeah? How much do you think Moose could get for *his* barn?”

“Well, now, Moose has got himself a real good one there, and it’s bigger than the Stoffers’. I’d like to see it up close, but just drivin’ by, you can tell that its siding is them old-fashioned, two-by-eighteen boards and one-by-three bats, all of ’em sixteen feet or longer. That’s all old-growth heartwood. You can’t find that new at any price. Let’s see. There must be five- or six-thousand board-feet of siding. I bet it’s all timber framed in hardwood like the Stoffer barn. That stuff ends up being made into furniture at a cabinet shop. Heck, Professor, if Moose takes it down himself, and does it careful, he should get twenty-five or thirty thousand, easy.”

“Oh, wow, Shorty! That has to be the solution to Moose’s problem. I’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

Tuesday afternoon, while waiting in the library at the corners for a student to come in for help, the Professor used Marge’s phone to call Moose. He encouraged Moose to look into the conversion of his barn into high-priced lumber and gave him Mark Coleman’s name. He also gave him Mark’s telephone number. He had found it in the copy of the town’s telephone directory that Marge kept on the library’s reference shelf.

More than five weeks went by before the Professor learned what Moose did about the barn. The Professor had just collected his mail at the combination Post Office and grocery store and was going out the door when Moose pulled up in a shiny, yellow pickup.

“Hey, Professor, what do you think of my new wheels?”

“It looks good, Moose, but I thought you were going to buy Junior’s one-ton GMC.”

“I did! And he threw in this Chevy. It’s only got seventy-five thousand miles on it.”

“Does this mean that you converted your barn into cash?”

“I sure did. Me and Mark are goin’ into business together. I’m gonna go around the valley buyin’ up barns with good lumber. I’ll tear ’em down and haul the stuff to Mark’s supply yards in town.”

“Well, tell me, Moose. Was Shorty right about how much you could get for your barn? He thought that you might get thirty thousand dollars, I think.”

“That would be about right, except for one thing that Shorty forgot.”

“What’s that?”

“He didn’t think about the old, faded Mail Pouch Chewin’ Tobacco sign painted on the highway side of the barn.”

“Oh, yes. Did that decrease the value much?”

“Decrease it? Heck, no! Mark had me number all the boards and bats so the sign could be put together again right, and we got *extra* money for it! Mark’s buildin’ this high-class women’s store for a customer. The guy’s even goin’ to call it ‘The Mail Pouch.’ These town folks are pretty funny. They don’t want new signs painted on their new buildings. They want old, barely readable ones.”

“But, Moose, what about your mother’s orchards? Who’s going to take care of them while you’re tearing down barns?”

“She’s goin’ to sell the ranch and move upstate near where my oldest brother lives. Do you know what those millionaire, dot-com nerds will pay for a hundred acres of mature trees in this valley? Mark told me. Ma is a rich woman! I’m goin’

to live in that little place behind Jack Brandt's house. I'm not goin' to have to mess around with orchards anymore!"

Over the next few years, Moose could always be seen on some ranch or other in the valley, dismantling a barn and loading it onto his GMC. And everyone noticed that he was less often involved in those bar fights that the sheriff was always having to break up. It seemed to the Professor that Moose had found a life's work

that he could be content with. The Professor was right, but it wasn't in the barn-wrecking business. After Moose had cleared the valley of nearly every salvageable barn and had accumulated a neat sum of money, he bought Ed's Tavern and tended bar there for the next forty years. During those years, the tavern became a favorite hangout of the black-sheep sons and daughters of the rich folks who were taking over the ranches in the rapidly gentrifying valley. Ω

*“In every life, no matter how full
or empty one's purse, there is tragedy.
It is the one promise life always fulfills.
Thus, happiness is a gift,
and the trick is not to expect it,
but to delight in it when it comes,
and to add to other people's store of it.”
—Charles Dickens*