

CHARLIE RHESUS AND THE LONELY VALENTINE HEART

Told by Granddad Brandsberg many years ago

In the little old drugstore next to Mildred's Hat Shop down on Main Street, they bring out the valentine heart boxes of candy every February. There are big ones full of plump, soft chocolates filled with orange, strawberry, vanilla and butterscotch creams.

There are medium-sized hearts filled with chocolate-covered nuts and raisins. And there are small hearts filled up with hard sugar candies that rattle like pebbles when you shake them.

By Valentine's Day, most of them are sold and on their way to make someone's sweetheart happy. All, that is, except for the biggest Valentine Heart of all. Year after year, the giant Valentine Heart waited for someone to buy it and take it away from the medicinal smells of the drug store. It wanted *anyone* to buy it as a nice present for someone they loved.

"No, too big," some people would say.

"Too much candy for my sweetie," others would declare, shaking their heads.

"Costs too much; I'll take one of those 89-cent hearts instead," still others would say.

So, the day after Valentine's Day, the druggist would take the poor, big Valentine Heart back to the storeroom, where it would wait for another year.

It was such a lonely life. Poor Valentine Heart was terribly sad. It was covered with a thin layer of dust and its gold foil cover was starting to tarnish. Its bright red cover was worn down to the gray paper in some spots.

And the shiny ribbon bow on the front was no longer crisp and fresh looking—it drooped and was crinkled on one loop where a box of bubblegum had been stacked carelessly on top of the Valentine Heart.

In the winter, the heart shivered in the cold of the drafty old storeroom. And in the summer, the heat was terrible. Then, the chocolates inside it turned as soft as jelly. In fact, some of the syrupy filling leaked out of a few of the candies. From years of being in storage, the

chocolate itself had faded to a splotchy light brown on the top sides of each piece.

“No one cares about me. No one even knows I exist,” the poor Valentine Heart cried to himself. “I wonder if I will ever have a chance to make someone happy.” The Valentine Heart stared at the storeroom ceiling and felt all alone.

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CHARLIE RHESUS was a monkey at the zoo in the city park. He liked to scramble around his cage to catch the bits of food people would toss to him. There was a sign that said “DO NOT FEED THE MONKEYS,” but Charlie would loop around his swing and scamper about, doing little tricks and making faces so people just *had* to reward him with a treat to eat. The zookeepers fed Charlie fresh fruit and vegetables and something that looked like dried dog food. The food Charlie got from visitors tasted a lot better. They’d toss him peanuts and sunflower seeds, sometimes the tip of an ice cream cone with a dab of ice cream in it; and once in a great while, a piece of candy.

Candy corn was good; jelly beans were sweet and chewy. Caramels were always sticky, but Charlie loved them all. Still, there was one thing that was better than anything else—that was milk chocolate. Charlie was simply crazy about that chocolate.

Whenever someone would toss him a leftover corner of a candy bar or a piece of straight milk chocolate, Charlie would snatch it up and zip up into the highest corner of his cage. There he would perch on the top of a tree trunk like a great bird and carefully eat his chocolate. He’d lick it gingerly, savoring every bit of its smooth, wonderful flavor. If it was an especially large chunk, he might nibble off tiny slivers and let them melt, one at a time, in his mouth.

With his eyes closed, Charlie would dream how wonderful everything would be if all the fruits and vegetables and dog-food-like meals turned into milk chocolate. *Mmmmm.*

One day, Elmer Brown noticed Charlie perched up high, enjoying a piece of chocolate. Elmer’s job was taking care of the monkeys and the big cats at the zoo. Most of the cats were grumpy whenever Elmer came

around, so he liked the monkeys better. They were always cheerful.

“What have you got now, Charlie?” Elmer called. Charlie turned his back and gulped down the last morsel of chocolate.

After all, the “Don’t Feed the Monkeys” sign meant he wasn’t supposed to eat anything besides the food that Elmer brought him. “He’ll never guess what that was,” Charlie thought, turning around and grinning at Elmer.

But Elmer knew. Many times he had watched Charlie from a distance. Elmer could see how much Charlie loved chocolate. So, once in a while, Elmer would bring along a little piece of chocolate as a treat to go with the dog-food-like stuff.

Charlie thought Elmer was the greatest zookeeper in the world. And Elmer really liked Charlie, so they became great friends. Then one day Elmer disappeared. He had taken a job at a zoo in another city and was so excited about it that he forgot to tell Charlie goodbye.

A man named Oscar replaced Elmer. Oscar was like a machine. Just like a robot, he came up the walk, opened the cage, put in the food, closed the door and went on to the next cage and repeated all those steps over and over. He did his job very well.

But he wasn’t any fun. He never talked to the big cats or the monkeys. He never whistled. He never brought any special treats. And worst of all, he *always* stood around and scolded anyone who tried to feed the monkeys. Oscar never smiled, either.

Charlie really missed his friend, Elmer, and his milk chocolate. He started watching Oscar very closely. Maybe he could figure out a way to make Oscar give him a piece of chocolate every once in a while. One day, as Oscar unlatched the gate on Charlie’s cage, the monkey noticed how easy it was to open. He could hardly wait to try it himself. But he knew Oscar mustn’t see him tampering with the latch. So, he waited until dark. By that time, Oscar had left for home and all the zoo visitors were gone, too.

Charlie scurried up to the gate on the cage, climbed up to the latch and reached the handle. At first, it wouldn’t budge. But then with several tugs and a twist,

the latch came undone. He gave it a little push, and the gate swung open a just a crack.

Seeing the gate open scared Charlie. He pulled it shut and closed the latch. Still frightened, he scampered to the back of the cage and zipped up into his favorite tree. He stayed there all night. All the next day, Charlie thought about opening the gate. And he thought about milk chocolate. How delicious it was! Maybe if he went outside of his cage, he could find some chocolate.

Finally, it was dark and quiet. Charlie sauntered across the floor of the cage and climbed up to the cage gate. At first, the latch wouldn't move. "I'll never get it open again," Charlie worried. But he jerked and wiggled, pulled and twisted on the handle and finally got the latch to turn loose. The gate swung open a little.

Charlie slipped through and pushed the gate shut so no one would notice. He scrambled down the walk as fast as he could go. A lion growled for a second and all was quiet again.

Being out of the cage was almost as good as having chocolate, Charlie found. He explored the zoo and the park that night. Just as daylight started to peep into the dark sky, he ambled back toward his cage. On the way, he found a bit of a chocolate bar someone had dropped in the dirt. It was covered with ants, but Charlie didn't mind. He gobbled it down, candy, ants and all. It was super-delicious.

When Charlie got back inside his cage, he closed the gate, climbed up his tree and went to sleep.

For several days, Charlie Rhesus ventured out at night, exploring the town, finding scraps of candy and other tasty goodies that he didn't get at the zoo. Once a big, loud dog chased him for two long blocks. Otherwise, his adventures were all fun.

One night Charlie came darting up the alley behind the drugstore. Suddenly, the smell of chocolate stopped him in his tracks. He sniffed the air. The delicious scent pulled him up to a window in the drugstore storeroom. Excitedly, Charlie climbed all over the store building. On the roof, he found a ventilator opening that he could squeeze through and get inside.

In seconds, he found the giant Valentine Heart. And in no time at all, he was nibbling away at the chocolates

inside. *They tasted heavenly.* Charlie ate seven pieces and was stuffed. He put the lid back on the heart and climbed out the vent, barely squeezing through the narrow opening. Slowly, he made his way back to his cage at the zoo.

Night after night, Charlie returned to the drugstore to feast on the chocolates in the giant Valentine heart. The candy was so good and so chocolatey that one night Charlie ate so much he couldn't squeeze out through the ventilator opening. Besides, being so full made him sleepy. So, he climbed inside the Valentine Heart and pulled the lid on so no one would disturb his sleep.

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The next morning, Suzie, a five-year-old girl, came into the drugstore.

"Today is my mom's birthday and I want to buy her something special," she told the druggist.

He showed her the scented soaps, the perfumes, the jewelry boxes and even the diaries.

"No, I don't think so," Suzie said slowly each time.

"How about one of these nice boxes of candy?" the druggist asked.

"Mmm. Let me see." Suzie could hardly lift one big box, it was so heavy.

"How much is it?"

"Eight dollars, a little more with tax," the man said.

Suzie shook her head. "But I have only three."

The druggist thought for a bit and a twinkle came into his eyes. "I have an idea! How about a very special present for your mother?"

Suzie listened.

"Wait right here." In a minute or two, he returned with the giant Valentine Heart.

"That's beautiful!" Suzie whispered excitedly.

"Fine. It's yours for three dollars. Let me tape the cover on it. It seems to be a little loose."

Suzie was surprised at how heavy the giant Valentine Heart was. It was almost larger than she was. Happily, she carried it home and hid it under her bed before her mother could see it.

That night after supper, Suzie's mother brought out the birthday cake and lit the candles on top. Suzie and her

dad sang "Happy Birthday" and her mom blew out the candles.

"I have a special surprise," Suzie announced. She ran to her room and brought back the Valentine Heart.

With a very pleased look on her face, the mother cut the tape on the heart and slipped off the cover.

Suddenly, Charlie Rhesus popped up out of the Valentine Heart with a huge grin on his face.

Suzie, her mother, and her father were so surprised they all jumped up from the table. Then they started to laugh.

"*Can we keep him?*" Suzie asked.

"We'll have to find out where he came from," her mother said. For the next two days, Charlie stayed with Suzie and her family. In that time, Suzie and Charlie became fast friends.

Finally, Oscar from the zoo came to pick up Charlie. That wasn't so bad because Oscar brought Elmer with him. In fact, Elmer came back to the zoo to stay. Charlie went back into his cage. With Elmer and Suzie for special friends, he got all the milk chocolate he wanted and was very happy.

And best of all, the giant Valentine Heart finally had a home. It was never lonely again.

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[Return to Previous menu](#)

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