

Toys For Tots

by Robert Taylor Brewer

Every year at the orphanage, a new trend sprouted fully grown from a Sears Christmas catalog, and even though our belief in Santa Claus was dashed early on, we still loved the season because it meant a Paint by Number, Pogo stick, Hula Hoop or whatever else was hot and bothering 12 year olds. Sister Edburga caught Johnny Dennis ogling the women's girdles but that was an aberration, that year, everybody got a brand new transistor radio. The year James Kirchner set the trend, we got guns.

James himself got a Midnight .38 Police Special with a box load of 50 cap rolls. Billy Dennis became a Texas Ranger with a side loader pistol and a 27 inch saddle rifle with cap rolls and plastic bullets. Bernard Loftin turned into an expert with a Cannoneer pistol and suction cup darts. James Macalister walked around with a Chopper Tommy gun tucked in a shoulder holster. Charles Auletta got a Daisy rifle that shot cork balls and came with a matching Bowie knife. Ritchie Waluda and John Dennis turned the lockerroom into a public fountain with pump action water rockets and Ronald Bogamil had a Matell Shootin' Shell Winchester with a secret trigger "in case the whole herd charged". The lockerroom was so full of toy weapons Charles said "We got an army here."

Guns were not allowed in the dining room but Vinnie O'Neil disobeyed, hiding a black Smith & Wesson underneath his shirt, which he took out and began blasting caps and yelling "Pshew, pshew" at Sister Erastus when she chased him up the stairs and out of the refectory. The boys laughed it off but the girls weren't having any fun.

"What's a matter" Benjamin Gonzalez said to his sister.

"Even if he disobeyed, at least you still got your presents," she said.

"You mean you don't?" Bennie got a Mauser and still had it ten days later.

"Uh, uh." his sister said.

There wasn't any shooting in the boy's lockerroom the day Charles Aueletta announced the plan. "We're gonna raid the girl side and get 'em back their toys. Everyone load up and get ready."

That evening the orphan battalion of Hopewell Troop extension 71 slipped out of the boy side, snaking across Fifth Avenue, past the statute of St. Michael in the Front Hall, colicky babies in the infirmary, and double doors down to the girl's lockerroom where Sister Gregory nearly threw up when she saw us out of the bolt blue.

"And what do you people think you're doing?" she said.

"We're here on an official mission." Charles said. "We're here to get the girls their toys back."

"Ah. A rebellion. Is that it?"

"That's it OK. Now hand over the closet keys."

"Well, you have a problem Mr. Aueletta. Those aren't real guns. You can't kill anyone with those guns."

"Maybe not. But have you ever been shot by a cork ball?" Charles said.

"We don't wanna kill anyone, just scare you to death." Bernard Loftin said. "Do I look scared? Do I look like some fraidy cat?" Sister Gregory said.

"You look mean," Philip Gugliardo said.

"I'm supposed to be mean." she said. "No one ever gave me dolls."

The boy side battalion knew deprivation when they heard it. They lowered their weapons like they were suddenly out of ammo.

"Come this way," Sister Gregory said.

The scout troop followed her to an alcove where she opened a door to closet space that had a cedar fresh smell to it. Inside the closet, row upon row of dolls, toys, and Christmas ornaments lay stowed on shelves with the names of the owners on tiny tags. Charles motioned with his rifle, and the girls leapt to their feet, lining up at the entrance to the storage closet.

"That's my Chatty Kathy" said Susan DeSantis. "She hasn't been changed in a week. Phew she stinks."

Anne Morris had been eating Pfeffernüsse cookies her parents left for her. "I need my Little Lulu dolly," she said.

Alisa Guile put her hand in the Pfeffernüsse box.

"Don't you think you've had enough? You're making such a pig of yourself."

"I'm waiting for Little Lulu," Annie said. "Make sure she's there for me?"

"Only if you give me some," Alisa said. "Walking Ballerina is in her party dress. I hope she's still there. The line is so big."

Margaret Morris didn't wait to be called. The line had wilted to nothing by the time she saw Margie Sub Teen on the shelf. She reached up and had the doll in her hands by the time she felt the cane crush her knuckles.

"She's named for me. She's named for me," Margaret cried as Sister Gregory mashed her other hand. Margie Sub Teen came with a complete wardrobe including cotton dress, silk housecoat, two pairs of vinyl shoes, even sunglasses.

"Take Betsy Wetsy" Sister Gregory said. "Margie Sub Teen is for someone else."

"I don't want Betsy Wetsy," Margaret said. "Margie Sub Teen is named for me. She's the one I should have."

No sooner were the words out than the back of Sister Gregory's hand lashed her face, knocking her backwards into the closet shelving. Her head had a gash on it and she fell openly sobbing. Sister Gregory closed the closet door; more cane thrashings followed leaving large dollaped welts on Margaret's arms and legs.

"Now get up child," Sister Gregory commanded. Dazed, confused, and wailing, Margaret staggered to her feet. "There, now child," Sister Gregory said, hugging the girl. "See how Jesus loves you."

