

Last Visit to the Toy Store

by Teresa Houle

Their waitress had left four mints for the two women.

"One for now, one for later," said the mother, popping the white and green striped mint in her mouth. "Do you feel like walking off the cheesecake, Pam?"

"Why not?" she said, rubbing her soft belly. "It's my day off from being mommy, and I deserved it."

"I never had a day off with you," the mother said, pouting. "You're so spoiled."

She held her compact in one hand while applying lipstick with the other. Raspberry Dreams.

Both women laughed at themselves while leaving the restaurant. They walked up the oak-lined street of their small prairie town, talking about the daughter's infant son.

They strolled by the display window of the local toy store. It was the only toy store in town not part of a multi-national corporation. Though it had been a town landmark for over forty years, the mother had only recently started shopping there. The toys were more expensive than she could afford when she was raising her own family, but now, as a grandmother, she adored the quaint shop.

The display was an assortment of painted wooden animal figures: giraffes, elephants, lions, monkeys, colorful birds, and a lazy-eyed sloth. The backdrop was a savanna with a watering hole and a few trees.

"These must be from Africa," said the mother. "Oh, let's go in. I want to see his new stock."

"I don't know how you can call it new, mom. He doesn't carry anything made since the Depression."

Small bells rang when they entered the store. The old man at the counter winked in their direction, but the mother's smile went unnoticed as his eyes dropped to a newspaper.

"You don't need battery operated gizmos to impress babies," she said to Pam. "Wait until he's ready for his first wooden train set. He'll play with that more than some electric, push-this-button toy."

The two walked around, taking in all the classics: the imported Russian matryoshka dolls of varying styles and bright colors; spinning tops, red Radio Flyer wagons, kaleidoscopes, and wooden yo-yo's invoked memories of Christmases past. The hand-stitched rag doll's dresses were made of scraps of material instead of pressed patterns.

"Do you take debit?" asked Pam.

"No," said the shopkeeper. "Cash or cheque only."

The phone rang. He answered the beige, wall-mounted rotary with a smile.

"ABC toys... I'll have to check my orders. I'll call you back."

He hung up the phone and picked up a wooden cane from the solitary hook in the counter. He replaced it on the hook after he stood up.

"Excuse me ladies," he said, ambling to the backroom.

The mother imagined that a workshop manned with sharply dressed elves would be revealed when he opened the door. Then Pam noticed a large, cream-colored music box with a faded ballerina painted on the top behind his unoccupied, worn chair.

"That's gorgeous," she said.

She carefully avoided knocking the cane off its hook while reaching behind the chair to pick up the box. She turned it over in her hands like it was a Rubik's Cube that she couldn't solve.

"A real antique."

"What song does it play?" the mother asked.

"I can't open it. Maybe it's broken."

"You should put it back."

"I want it. I just love it."

"I don't think it's for sale," said the mother nervously, her palms suddenly sweating.

They heard the door open. The daughter moved further into the store with the music box. The old man meandered back to his counter with his order book and sat down.

"Do you have your nail file, mom?"

Pam examined the box thoroughly, digging her short fingernails into the cracks.

"No, why?" asked the mother, wiping her hands on her hips, fretfully.

"I'm trying to open this box," she said.

She held it up for the old man to see.

"Is this broken?"

He quickly looked behind his chair and then turned back to her, his eyes fixed on the box.

"Give that back," he snapped, grabbing his cane and pushing himself up as quickly as he could. He didn't put it down this time.

"I'd still be willing to pay for it," said Pam. "At a discount perhaps?"

"You have no right," he said, snatching the music box from her hands. He held it tightly and glared at her, glassy eyed.

"Get out."

He ushered them to the door, locked up behind them, and flipped the sign to read CLOSED.

The two women walked away, shocked.

"Well, that was rude," the mother said, clutching her purse as though she'd expected to be robbed of it.

Pam frowned.

"He's nuts if he thinks I'm going to pay full price for a broken music box."

The mother watched Pam drive off after walking back to their cars, and then she headed back to the store. She knocked on the door several times before the old man finally came out of the backroom and opened it.

"I'm sorry about my daughter," she began, but his expressionless face halted her from continuing.

The bells ceased ringing, leaving emptiness in the store. She wished the bells would ring forever.

"And I'm sorry about mine," he said, still holding the box. "Her name was Elizabeth. This is where I keep her ashes."

