

As it Was Said

I lay back against the park bench and watched the bus stop with half-dosed eyes. The bus would be arriving any minute. After running around all day at work I was looking forward to getting home and blowing off some steam.

"You look bored, mister." Chimed a sudden voice to my left.

I turned to find a girl next to the bench staring curiously at me. She looked about seven but could have been closer to nine—I was never good at guessing ages. Her light auburn hair came down in curls that seemed to bob with anticipation out of proportion to the statement.

"Something like that," I smiled politely, "I've had a long day."

I quickly scanned the parents and children behind the girl. None of them seemed to be paying attention to us. Some of the parents were talking to each other, though, so maybe hers was one of them.

"I know what'll cheer you up, mister!" The girl exclaimed with a proud sagacity that only a child could muster. "You can play with me!" She grabbed my wrist enthusiastically

The sound of eight wheels coming to a halt gave me an escape. "While I would love to," I said as I extricated myself, "my bus has just arrived."

I hurried on to the bus and flashed my pass to the driver. The girl was gone by the time I sat down and looked out the window. I didn't have anything against kids per se, but I was drained from work and wasn't in the mood for dealing with a child's energy or whatever her parents would do if they saw a strange man talking to their daughter. That was a conversation I wasn't in the mood for.

It was good to get home to my apartment. I kicked off my shoes and threw my socks in the laundry. It was a relief to let my skin breathe. For a snack, I cut an apple from the fridge into slices. I considered adding a splotch of peanut butter on the side for dipping, but decided against it when I checked the jar. There was only a little bit left and it would be better to save the remainder for tomorrow's breakfast. I updated my shopping list before taking my plate into the living room and hunkering down on the couch. It was a good combination for unwinding: light snack to sate my appetite, some music to fill the background, and soft couch for a refreshing nap. I picked up the universal remote and hit the stereo button. Nothing happened.

"Eh?"

I hit the button again, still nothing. I'd need to add batteries to the list. Grumbling, I got up and hit the power button manually. The button didn't move; felt odd too. Actually, it felt like—but that wouldn't make sense. I felt along the player to try and confirm my bizarre suspicion.

"What the?"

I was right. This wasn't my stereo. It was a fake, a replica made of plastic. I picked up the lightweight copy and turned it over. Definitely a good likeness, but not one that would hold up if someone got close. The idea that this was part of a practical joke came to mind, but that didn't make sense since it would require someone to break in.

My stomach dropped at the thought. That was it. Someone had broken in and stolen my CD player and left this...thing in its place. It made sense, sort of. The longer it takes for a person to realize they've been robbed, the easier it is for the thief to get away. My amazement at the ingenuity was tempered by my being the victim in this case. I wanted to call the police but decided that checking to see if anything else had been stolen would be a better first step.

I looked over the apartment and was surprised that my desktop computer was the only other thing taken. It was odd that the television had been left alone, but maybe the robber only had certain types of replicas? They really were well made, I considered while turning over the plastic box that had taken the place of my monitor. Maybe these were product models? Design prototypes? Whatever, I could play CSI after calling the actual experts.

A squeaking sound from the kitchen startled me into dropping the monitor. It made a hollow thud as it hit the floor. The sound came again. I recognized it this time as my kitchen cabinets being opened. There was someone in the other room. Cautiously, I inched along the wall and into the hallway as the sounds of rummaging continued. I crept up to the kitchen and chanced a glance inside.

What the—?

"You!" I exclaimed, more out of bewilderment than anything else as I stepped into the kitchen.

"Me!" The girl from the park chimed happily, spinning around to greet me with a smile. She was sitting on my counter.

"Did you follow me?"

"Yup!" She declared proudly. "Now we can play together! I wanted to start a tea party but you don't have any of the right cups."

I held up a hand. "Just... just give me a moment here."

My stomach tightened as I tried to quickly process this development. It was bad enough that I just got robbed, but now I had a child in my kitchen. It took at least an hour to get here from the park, so she'd likely been reported missing by now. There was no way I could get her back to the park without being spotted, and the last thing I needed was being accused of kidnapping. Maybe I could call the police and tell the truth—that this girl had followed me home. She could corroborate, so hopefully that'd avoid unwanted attention. I could always report the robbery afterwards. Yea, that'd work.

“Ok,” I said, ushering the girl into the living room, “here’s the thing. You can’t follow strangers home just because you want to play with them. Your parents are likely very worried right now and looking for you. They might think you’d been kidnapped and called the police. This would be bad, yes?”

The girl thought it over but eventually nodded. I was making progress. “Right. So what I’m going to do is call the police and let them know that this is all a big mix-up.”

I picked up the phone and began to dial. The buttons were rubbery, spread further apart than normal, and made a cheery ***bing*** with each press. This was a toy; another replica left by the robber.

“Son of a b—” I began before remembering that there was a child in the room. I must’ve forgotten to check the phone during my sweep. I turned to the girl and smiled weakly. “My phone’s been, ah, replaced with a toy.” It sounded stupid to say it aloud but I wasn’t in the mood to try and explain around the situation. “Just... just wait here. I need to see if the neighbours are in.”

It would be quick. Hop over next door, ask to use their phone, and hopefully the girl would stay put. If she followed me and her face had already gotten on the news, then this mess could get unhelpfully complex. However, these concerns proved moot as my front door wouldn’t open. The doorknob refused to turn. After some fruitless tugging, it dawned on me that the doorknob was completely smooth. The keyhole was gone. I stepped back, bewildered. I came through this door only an hour ago. How could the keyhole be suddenly missing? What the hell was going on?

Wait, if the door is sealed, how did—? No, they couldn’t be connected—maybe? Coincidence? But how likely was it? Then again, how likely was all of this? I tried to sort this out as I returned to the living room. The girl was on the couch playing with the fake phone. I watched her for a minute as she continued to dial random numbers and giggle at the chiming tones. No, I decided, it was too bizarre even for what was going on now. I’d get us both out and sort the details later.

“Let’s go.” I said sharply. “There’s something going on here. We need to leave this apartment”

Thankfully she didn’t ask for an explanation. I’m not sure I could’ve given one. The girl put down the toy phone and followed me into the bedroom. The metal of the fire escape glimmered tantalizingly from beyond the window. The window was unsurprisingly locked but I wasn’t planning on opening it.

“Stand back.” I instructed as I pulled the sheet off my bed. I wrapped it around my right hand and punched the window. While I wasn’t particularly strong, the glass wasn’t particularly good quality. It cracked after two blows. On the third, my fist broke through and I yelped in pain and surprise as it slammed into a wall on the other side with an audible ***crack***.

Gasping, I pulled back my hand and stared, dumbstruck at the window. There was a wall on the other side of the shattered glass. The fire escape could still be seen through the still-intact shards that clung to the frame and the upper portion of the window. I watched as cracks crawled through the remaining glass. One by one, sections of the window broke apart and fell to the ground, each exposing another part of the wall. When the floor was littered with glass, the frame dropped as well, leaving behind unblemished brick.

I looked down and could still make out the fire escape through some of the larger shards. This was nuts. None of this should be possible. There was too much adrenaline pumping through me to kid myself this was all a dream. I pulled off the sheet and looked down at my hand. The skin was cut in several places from the impact with the wall. Surprisingly, there wasn't any continual pain, just a warm aura of sorts. I'd never broken a bone before so I didn't know if this was normal.

There was something *off* about the skin though. It was starting to feel loose and even looked... baggy? I spied black inside the cuts. Cautiously, I pushed the sides of one of the cuts apart to get a better look. I yelped as the skin tore at the pressure; a patch clung to the inspecting fingers and peeled off painlessly as I pulled back in fright. I stared at the strip of skin hanging from my left hand before turning my eyes to my right. I desperately needed the normalcy of a gaping, bloody opening in my right hand. It was not to be. Poking through the side of my right hand was a patch of black fur. Horrified, I prodded the patch. It was real. I felt it—felt through it. It wasn't fur—not normal but—

It took a moment before I realized I had begun peeling off the rest of my right hand. Each leaf of skin exposed more of the black fur. With each piece of skin, my hand began to take on a rounded, puffed form. My fingers became increasingly hard to move individually. Cloth-like, stitched pads were exposed as my palm tore away. My morbid panic continued until there was nothing left on my hand to peel away and I could not say for certain where along my lower arm the black ended and my skin began. I stared transfixed at what my hand had become. It was soft and warm to the touch. I squeezed, but felt no sign of bone or sinew. My right hand had become the unmistakable paw of a plush toy.

I stumbled into the living room unable to take my eyes off the paw. It moved normally enough. I could feel the couch through its synthetic fur as I sat down. But this... none of this made any sense. My heart raced as the full weight of events came at me. Doors don't seal themselves, walls don't appear behind outside windows, and hands do not become pieces of toys! Hell, my hand could be a regular paw and it would make more sense! With pads and claws and movable fingers! A panicked grin spread across my face. Oh yes, how much more *normal* it would be for my skin to peel away for a *regular* animal's paw.

The fear was getting to me. I needed to calm down before I lost it completely. I cast about for a bit of normalcy; something that I could focus on. My eyes found the plate of apple slices I cut up before this madness started. I eagerly seized a slice and shoved it into my mouth as I fell back onto the couch. Chewing slowly, I savoured each bite and squirt of juice. I let myself get lost in the moment; just another after-work routine. Relax on the couch; enjoy some apple slices, and let the stress fall away. Good, my heart had stopped racing. All I needed to do was relax and focus on the apple. I swallowed and reached for another slice—grk!

A stabbing pain erupted into my throat as I felt my chest heave. I doubled over and fell off the couch before vomiting. The pain ended as quickly as it began. Something clattered against the floor. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and looked down. It took a moment to realize what I was seeing. Sitting in a pool of saliva was a fully intact, plastic slice of apple. Another toy. I had chewed on that slice for at least

three minutes, slowly reducing it into a pulp in my attempt to focus, yet what I had just thrown up was perfectly solid and intact.

That wasn't the worst part. Scattered about the fake apple slice were small, grayish white objects. Teeth. I had vomited out my own teeth and there wasn't even a trace of blood. My mouth was completely dry. My left hand trembled as I felt the inside of my mouth. Instead of slimy gums my fingers met soft cloth and fabric. I tried moving my tongue. A strip of felt twitched.

The creak of couch springs signaled that the girl had sat down next to me. I'd forgotten about her. She smiled at me in an absent, childish way. There wasn't a hint of curiosity or alarm at seeing my warped hand or fallen teeth. My earlier thoughts came floating back.

"How did you get into my apartment?" I asked slowly. Although my mouth moved it felt divorced from my voice, like lip-synching. "The door was sealed."

"I came in." She replied.

"How?" I pressed.

"I came in," she repeated, puzzled at the question. "I wanted to be here, so I was. After all, you're my new playmate!"

The word 'playmate' struck me. I looked from the toy phone to the plastic stereo to my changed hand. Toys, pieces of a child's entertainment. The idea that this was the reason—the point behind this madness—

"I won't play with you."

The girl pouted. "Yes you will," suddenly, her voice changed to a pitch-perfect imitation of mine, "'While I would love to, my bus has just arrived.'"

I stumbled back at what should've been an impossible mimicry. Her voice returned to normal as she said, "At the park, remember?" So I came here and now I'm taking you home so we can play!"

My left hand balled into a fist. "That's what this is about?" I demanded. My voice shook with indignation. "It was a polite gesture. A social nicety! Even if you were a real child you should've understood that! To use it as an excuse for—for—for whatever the hell this is!?"

I thrust my plush hand in front of her face. The effect was less intimidating than I'd hoped. She poked my hand. It tickled as the fabric was pushed in.

"You need it to come into my home." The girl said with a reassuring air. "But then we can play as much as we want."

"I can't go anywhere. You've sealed us in." I retorted derisively.

“Well the apartment is coming too,” she said matter-of-factly, “it’ll be a great playhouse, don’tcha think?”

I looked around. The television had become another plastic ‘replica’. The floor was even starting to feel slicker beneath my feet. Looking over the couch I could see into the kitchen. It still looked normal, but I had no idea for how long. My apartment was becoming this thing’s dollhouse.

“Everything will be so much fun!” The girl chimed excitedly. She grabbed my arm just above the fabric. “Soon we’ll —“

“No!” I shouted, pulling my right arm back and grabbing her shoulder with my left. “Fix this. Now!”

“Ok!” The girl beamed. With inhuman speed she wrapped her hands around my chest and pulled me into a hug. Her grip was like a vice. I couldn’t breathe.

“St-st-“ the plea wouldn’t come. There was an audible ***crack*** as one of my ribs gave way. Another soon followed.

As quickly as it had begun the girl released me. She skipped away into the kitchen, humming, leaving me crumpled in pain on the plastic floor.

“I’ll get a tea party started! It won’t take long!”

I forced myself up, wheezing. Each breath was agonizing, but the pain meant I was still real. My I resented having to use my toy hand to feel along my side, but its touch was much gentler and, in a sick way, soothing. The cheap comfort of the fabric didn’t stop a surge of pain when I reached my broken ribs. The area was starting to feel warm, definitely internal bleeding. If my spleen had been punctured... perhaps that might not be such a bad way to go. No, I couldn’t think like that. I needed to get away from the thing in my kitchen. I needed to be anywhere but here.

I dragged myself into the hallway. There was only one way out I hadn’t tried yet. The apartment building was old and despite numerous renovations still retained an old-fashioned dumbwaiter. The shaft led to what was now the garbage room, but it was still big enough for a person. I carefully flipped the latch and began to slide the wall panel open. It was a slow, cautious process. Each time the panel creaked I froze, listening in case the girl had heard. She never did. Even after I had slid the panel half-open the only sounds were her humming nursery rhymes from the kitchen, the rummaging of plates, and my own cautious brea—

A tremor struck my throat and the air within died. I tried taking another breath but it wouldn’t come. I wanted my heart to race but felt no heartbeat. I wanted to cry out in pain as I grabbed my side but there were no injuries. I pulled off my shirt to see what I already knew. My chest had warped. A swath of white filled the middle of an otherwise amber colouring. I ran my hand through the fur, feeling for any sign of life. There was nothing but soft fabric and stuffing. No lungs, no heart, no bone or stomach. I should’ve been dead. I wasn’t.

The panel creaked loudly as I pushed it open. I didn't care if the girl heard. I climbed into the shaft, let go, and plummeted. It wasn't until the shaft gave way that I realized what the girl had meant by taking the apartment with her. If this were still my apartment building, I would've hit a dumpster in the garbage room by now. Instead I was falling through open air. My first encounter with the girl's true home was when I slammed into the darkened ground below.

It was the lack of vital organs that let me survive the fall. My right arm had split open from the impact of landing on it. Losing my chest had shown me how the girl's power worked. She was tearing me apart, bit by bit, until only a toy remained. It was no surprise that fresh fabric, coloured to match my chest, emerged from the broken limb. Still, the rest of my arm was worth getting out of the apartment. I slowly pulled myself up and checked what remained of my body for injuries. My head and left arm were fine, but there was a fissure running along both feet that extended across my legs. They could still support me, but I would need to be careful as I explored wherever it is I was.

Nothingness extended into an unending horizon as I walked. There was no floor to speak of. The darkness I walked on was the same that filled the air. This couldn't be where the girl lived, could it?. Whatever she was, her motives were those of a child. This place shouldn't be so empty. At the very least there should be teacups considering how determined she was to play tea party. I rubbed my head. Guessing about the thing's lifestyle was pointless. The important part was that if this was where she lived, then there had to be a door somewhere. I'd find it, get out, and get help. That was all I could focus on as I hobbled through the blackness.

I was unsure of when I first spotted it. All I knew was that some part of the darkness seemed different than the rest. As I approached, I realized what I was seeing. There was an object on the ground in the distance. The thrill of finding something was tempered by the need to keep my legs intact. More and more objects emerged as I drew closer, but they remained obscured to me. It wasn't until I was directly on top of one that I saw what they were. Toys. A collection of dolls and stuffed animals piled as high as I could see. I leaned back to try and find the top. The mountain vanished into the darkness, but I could make out a faint prick of light up above. Relief flooded through me. Light! A way out!

I tried climbing onto the pile of toys. They were compact enough to support my weight, but by now I had lost most of the feeling in my legs. Despite my best efforts, the fissure was spreading, even on to my pants. I'd never be able to make it up if I couldn't feel what I was perching on. But that would mean—no. No. I couldn't do it. The thought of letting that—it wasn't happening.

I began the climb. I didn't get far. Unable to feel my legs, I couldn't tell what I was using as a foothold. Every time it looked like I was making progress I would step on some stuffed animal's tail or try to find footing on a doll's tiny arm. With each occurrence I'd lose my balance and fall. The landing was cushioned by the toys at the mountain's base. On the umpteenth attempt it looked like I was finally making headway. I'd gotten farther than ever and could see the light starting to grow larger above me. A small plateau was just ahead. All I needed to do was hoist myself up and —

My foot slipped on a too narrow purchase. I scrambled to grab onto something but it was too late. I was in freefall. A shooting pain stabbed through my left arm when I landed. It took a moment to

realize the source. As I oriented myself, I saw my left arm impaled on the bayonet of a toy soldier. I trembled in dread as I pulled my arm off. The skin fell away, clinging to the bayonet. My newest plush limb was unblemished.

This was just too much. I fell back onto the pile and rolled over, burying my face in my arms. I wanted to scream. I wanted to scream and cry and rage at whatever creature was in my apartment and at myself for trying to spare a little girl's feelings countless hours ago. None of this was supposed to be possible! All I had wanted was to take the bus home, relax, and go about my day. I shouldn't be—be—

There weren't even words for it. I loosed myself at the insane pile of toys. I wanted to pull each one apart and make it pay for what was being done to me. They couldn't be pried off, so I did the next best thing. I struck and punched the toys with as much strength as I could force through my pathetic plush hands. I kicked at every painted face, every stitched smile I could see and didn't stop until I lost balance and fell off the pile entirely. My legs had long since split from the force of my anger. They'd fallen away like a discarded cast, leaving behind black, rounded paws, fabric limbs, and a large puffy tail; orange-brown with a white tip.

I pressed my eyes shut as tears streamed. It was maddening, almost disgusting to take comfort in the touch of my paws or the warmth of my fur as I cried. I couldn't even get out of my apartment properly, and here I was trying to climb a mountain of toys for a pinprick of light. What was I hoping for? To climb out of a manhole on the street? To find a doctor and get a pill to make everything go back to normal? Tears ate away at what little skin I had left. My mouth burned away as a rounded muzzle emerged. Cute, triangular ears unfolded atop my head as hair and scalp sloughed off. I cried until my eyes dried into shining plastic and my muzzle fixed into a smile. I hugged myself. It was all I could do. It was all I had left.

I was back in my apartment. I was sitting on a couch made of felt. Someone was holding me.

"You fell into the bad place!" She said. "I was so worried about you!"

My midriff squished as she held me tighter. It felt nice.

"No one is supposed to go to the bad place! But toys have to when they break! My last toy knew that but he still broke himself! We played so much but he broke himself!"

She buried her face in my fur. "I don't want to lose you before we can play!"

Her voice was so scared, so sincerely oblivious to what I had seen. I put my paws around her neck. If I tried, I should be able to muster enough strength. I thought back to the mountain. There had to be thousands of toys making it up.

She looked up at me, smiling. "I'm glad I got you out. I know we're going to have so much fun together."

I looked into her beaming eyes. My paws slid forward. I lifted her onto my lap and hugged her close.

“Don’t worry. I’ll always be here for you.”

I retreated as I said those words. I took warmth from my paws, comfort from my cheery grin, and solace from my cuddly fur and pillow-like tail. I took everything I could and surrounded myself with it as I pulled back. I took her smile, her soft giggle, and her earnest joy as I fled. I took it all and used it to shield myself from what I knew. I buried myself beneath games and hugs and laughter. I let myself sleep, protected by our fun.

Jonas Belford, 2012