

Toy Soldiers

I watched a lot of crime shows when I was younger. I especially liked the ones where scary snarl-faced men got questioned under bright lights, then got locked in silver cuffs and thrown into jail cells. I liked them because I knew I would never be one of those men, and my innocent eyes could watch their unfortunate fates unfold from the comfort of my living room. But now, sitting stoically in the dark security office of the Patrick Stone Museum of American History, I felt gut wrenchingly similar to one of the criminals on my tv.

About ten feet in front of me stood a round-bellied security guard. One of his hands was planted firmly on a desk, appearing burdened by his tilting body weight. His other hand nervously ran through his greased black hair. His eyes darted from me to my teacher, who stood awkwardly between us. He then tugged a gold-painted badge from his pocket, as if to reassure himself of his authority, and began to break the silence.

“So I s’pose ya’ know why I called ya’ both back here”. There was silence. “We at this museum have zero tolerance for any rule-breaking, especially on school trips like yours where the museum basically pays for your visit.”

“Well I didn’t do anything” I stammered. I suddenly felt childish and small compared to this man. Why was I lying? I was not usually one to lie. Dating back to elementary school, I found pleasure in being the perfect kid. I was the girl with the constantly-raised hand and the perfect attendance, the girl who had nightmares about getting a detention. But after last night, I developed a feeling that I was sinking slowly into a pit of sticky peanut butter. Everything I had was changing drastically, I deserved to act out.

The guard shifted his weight, dragging the toe of one scuffed black boot across the concrete floor, and let out a sigh. “Please don’t make this difficult for me. You just have to give em’ back and I’ll call your parents and we can both get out of here.”

I continued to sit silently, my lips pressed tightly together in defiance. I pictured the man rolling away like a bowling ball, his mop of unwashed hair crawling after him. I could also imagine him inflating like a balloon and floating upward, bursting through the ceiling. I hoped he called my dad and had to feel the frustration of his call being ignored. Or better yet, I hoped he called Addison and heard her high pitched, aggravated voice after her evening pampering was interrupted.

From across the room my teacher shot me a disapproving stare. It felt cold on my cheek, like an ice pack to the skin, but I didn’t turn my head to acknowledge it. My teacher’s name was Mr. Brooks, and he was nice for a history teacher. He was tall and lanky, with a wiry brown mustache that laced his upper lip and amplified his facial expressions. Right now, his mustache frowned at me. I guess didn’t blame him; Mr. Brooks saw me as the reason he was coming home late from work, leaving his wife and young son to have dinner without him. If I were Mr. Brooks, I would scowl at me too.

Unfortunately, bowling-ball man did not leave the room. Instead, he stood proudly in front of a dated computer monitor which displayed security footage from the morning. I immediately saw my pale blue zip-up wander into the museum gift shop, my hands wedged deeply into my pockets. I gulped. The three of us watched me skim the toy section suspiciously and sculk out the back entrance. It was impossible to miss my pale hand diving hastily into the

bin of small painted soldiers and slipping a handful into my backpack. The room felt colder suddenly, as if a window somewhere had been blown open by the wintry weather outside.

“Look, there she is. You can see her stealing right there.” The guard pointed at the screen. He now spoke directly to Mr. Brooks. “Can you tell her to stop lyin’ to me?”

Mr. Brooks disregarded the man and turned to face me. “Carson can you please just return the soldiers? I don’t want this man to have to call the police and make this into a bigger deal than it already is.” Mr. Brooks looked at me sympathetically. “You know this isn’t you.”

Realizing I had no other option, I reached into my backpack to retrieve the stolen soldiers. One by one, I slowly stood the tiny figurines on the metal table in front of me. I lined them up with care, examining each of their painted faces and detailed armor. When I was finished I gazed up at the guard, my eyes challenging him.

“Thank you”, the guard grumbled as he confiscated the soldiers. “What does a young girl like you need with toy soldiers anyways?” He thought this was funny, as a puff of air immediately shot out of his wide nostrils.

Frustration boiled within me, and I suddenly wanted to grab this big stupid man by his uniform and throw his phony badge right at his head. I wanted to snap at him, but decided to stay quiet. The man was just doing his job, and I guess his question was justified. I didn’t have a reason to steal anything. However, I did have a reason to be in a terrible mood that day, and stealing seemed to be the best way to act on it.

My mind flashed back to the previous evening. The afternoon was going as planned; I didn’t have much homework, so I went with my younger brother Jamie to pick out a christmas tree from the small market set up next to Central Park. Bundled in layers of jackets and fuzzy

mittens, the two of us of lugged 30 pounds of prickly evergreen all the way back to Dad's apartment. A light flurry fluttered through the air around us, inspiring Jamie to sprint down the icy sidewalk with his mouth hanging open in an attempt to taste the snow. I stopped to watch his stupidity unfold, witnessing a few good wipeouts into dirt-covered snowbanks. We finally reached the building just as the sun was beginning to set and a golden glow was cast upon our frozen cheeks. Jamie ran ahead of me, rushing to get inside.

As soon as I stepped into the apartment I sensed something was off. The dim ceiling lights revealed my Dad sitting in the old reclining chair, yet he was the opposite of reclined. His elbows dug into his knees, his hands propping up his sullen head. I couldn't see his face.

"Michael, I know this isn't ideal but you *know* how important my work is, especially for this family. If I don't transfer they're going to hire someone else. God, we were supposed to be *saving* money to do renovations!" Addison's slender figure strolled into the room, looking pleadingly at my Dad for a response. Her mousy face twitched with irritation as she paced across the small living room. Her dull eyes then landed upon me, standing silently in the doorway. "Car, you're trailing snow everywhere. I thought we agreed on getting one of those tabletop trees this year." Her tone was flat.

"Sorry, Jamie and I thought a real tree would be better." I propped the tree against the wall and began to unlayer. "What were you and Dad talking about before?"

Behind her, my Dad stood up from his hunched position and clasped his hands behind his neck. The creases in his forehead seemed more defined, and his eyes looked sunken and dark.

"Well I've been meaning to tell you, honey...your stepmom's company needs her to manage the

branch up in Boston. We've known this for a while now, we're just getting to a point financially where moving might be the only option."

My stomach dropped. His words pierced my mind slowly but forcefully, like a barbed fish hook that I couldn't yank out. We're moving to Boston? With a spinning head and dry mouth I stumbled forward, landing clumsily onto the sunlight-bleached sofa that lined our window. Collapsed on the piled cushions, I stared blankly at the distant brick walls and smoky air outside. The sun had set, and the city stared back at me with somber eyes that would soon be lost in my memory.

"Why can't we stay here" I whispered, my words muffled by the sleeve of my shirt. "You have a job...you work at the pharmacy".

"I know Car, it's just not enough anymore. We can't compete with the Walgreens down the block and we're not making nearly as much as we used to." His face relaxed and a forced smile spread across his cheeks. "Addison has a really good job that can help you and Jamie get through school and into college. This is just a small complication; Boston could be good for all of us. Remember that time we went to Boston to see a Red Sox game? You liked that, I remember you did."

I was not going to Boston. His calming words only inflated my anger into a balloon about to burst. I felt like everything I had was being ripped from my hands and thrown into the air, like I had to stop my entire life from running away from me. Stupid Addison. This was all Addison. Her tangerine sweaters and swooping chestnut hair and stuck up corporate title could never be our mother. Addison had seeped into our family like an illness, penetrating the mind of our hopeless father and tricking him into thinking that *she* could be the cure to his sadness. But it

was all a lie. Now our father depended on this woman and was willing to uproot our lives to keep her. He was afraid he would be abandoned again.

“Okay Dad” I murmured, trudging towards my room. I stopped right in the middle of the living room. Peeping through my bedroom doorway was Jamie, his blue eyes glassy with tears. He had been eavesdropping the whole time. His small bottom lip quivered and he gazed up at me, as if waiting for me to say it was all a joke.

“Jamie, come to talk to us” my Dad ordered, but my brother had already slammed the door. After a few seconds, I knocked gently so he knew it was me. The door opened with a creak and I slid into the room.

“Hey bud” I whispered, stepping over an ocean of scattered toys. I quickly realized many of the action figures were in pieces and the cars were smashed irreparably. “I know this sucks.”

Now his eyes were glued to the grass green carpet. “I want to stay here Carson” he muttered.

“Me too, Jamie”. I turned off the ceiling light and sat down on the bed. Kicking aside my outfit for my field trip tomorrow, I slipped under the covers. He joined me, curling up on my shoulder. “Sometimes we just don’t get to choose.”

“Carson, the officer just said we can leave.” Mr. Brooks’ voice snapped me back into the present. I quickly gathered myself, slinging my backpack over my shoulder and heading towards the door.

“I’m going to head to my car. We called your dad and he said he’ll be waiting out front for you. Goodnight, Carson.”

Mr. Brooks left the room, and suddenly I was alone in the museum hallway. I wandered towards the front, dragging my soggy boots on the marble floors. My footsteps were the only noise in the giant empty building, each squeak of the floor echoing. My time as a criminal was over, and I couldn't say I felt any better than before. My previous distress was now replaced with guilt and exhaustion. I approached the giant glass doors separating me from the outside world and sighed. Staring at the snow-coated lamp posts and milky dark sky, I felt calm for the first time all day.

I immediately recognized our small gray Volkswagen parked across the street. I ventured towards its scratched bumper and saw my dad, hugging himself for warmth, waiting for me outside.

"Dad, I know I screwed u--". My words were muffled by my Dad's sudden embrace, as he hugged me tightly. I hugged him back and the two of us stood together in silence in the snow.

"I understand honey" he whispered, a warm tear welling in his eye. "I shouldn't have dumped that all on you last night. Whatever I can do to make this move easier I'll do it".

His reaction surprised me. I smiled slightly. Somehow, I believed him. The feeling of panic and distress from last night still lingered in my chest, but it was a little less now. Something in my Dad's words felt genuine. I had forgotten about this side of him and immediately realized how much I had missed it.

I slid into the backseat to find Jamie sitting quietly. He was tapping the buttons on his Nintendo with determination, and it took a few seconds for him to notice me.

“Wanna decorate the tree tonight?” I asked. His red cheeks turned towards me, nodding in response. Checking to see if my dad was still outside, I reached into my jacket pocket. I fished out a single soldier and placed in its lap.

Jamie’s eyes lit up, as he fingers examined the figure’s intricate armor and tiny sword. “Is this for me?”

“Yeah you can keep it, just don’t show Dad.”