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# The Mannequin's Christmas



Nobody ever gave Jed Bradbury a smile except his mother, and she had died five years ago when he was fourteen. His father's second wife Loretta had been persuaded to come to the Bradbury farm only because of a promise to get rid of the son. If Jed ever hoped to receive any kindness from his stepmother, it was a futile hope. She loathed him. His protruding eyes rolled nervously when he looked at her; he stuttered when he talked; a port wine stain blemished the right side of his face from earlobe to chin. When he ate, he seemed so intent upon his food that the stain grew more purplish and veins stood out upon his forehead. At night in his room upstairs, he could be heard stuttering to the picture of his mother and to the cat which she held in her arms. Loretta doubted his sanity.

The young wife of Tom Bradbury also feared the son. Stories of his temper and strength intensified that fear. She knew of the time when Tom slapped his first wife during an argument and Jed, then thirteen, had run to the kitchen, grabbed

a shotgun, aimed it at his father, and pulled the trigger. Luckily, the gun was not loaded. She knew of the incident in the high school gym when it took the principal, the coach, and a teacher to pull sixteen-year-old Jed off a student who said Jed looked like a demon because his mother was a witch. Fearing more trouble likely to arise between his son and other students, Tom took Jed out of high school and sent him to a vocational school a few miles away at Bowling Green, where he could develop his talent for mechanics.

Jed's talent resulted from his mother's encouraging him to work with his hands. She gave him books on mechanics, subscribed to magazines dealing with crafts, and on birthdays gave him tools. In his vocational school classes he excelled in both the theory and practice of electrical and auto mechanics. If he ever thought of his achievement, it was, as it had always been, with the satisfaction of doing well for his mother. His devotion to his tasks may have partially explained why in the two years he was in voca-

tional school he did not become involved in any acts of violence with other students, who wisely did not provoke him. They had heard stories about him and gave him a wide berth. But in spite of Jed's success at school, Loretta never let a day go by without saying, "Listen, Tom, you've got to send him away or I'll leave."

But the exile was delayed because Jed was useful to his father. His technical skill saved Tom maintenance bills on his machinery and appliances. Even neighboring farmers often relied on Jed for repair work. So when Jed was not in the field or doing chores around the barns, he was under a car or overhauling some farm machine or appliance. When he did these repairs, no one had to look at him or even talk to him. Strangely enough, Jed seemed indifferent to his friendless world. Motors, machines, and gadgets responded to his touch. He was like a robot that worked silently, tirelessly. It was only in his room that he talked and found comfort in the picture of his mother.

About two o'clock one humid September afternoon, Jed and his father drove the tractor and hay bailer up to the toolshed behind the house. "Jed," said his father, "let's go take a look at the refrigerator, Loretta says it's running constantly. You'd better check it out."

They went up to the house and into the kitchen. They could hear the bathroom water running upstairs. "Hey, Loretta," called her husband, "Jed's going to fix the refrigerator. I've got to go back to the toolshed."

Loretta had an idea. She finished her bath and put on her nylon robe. Then she went down to the kitchen. The refrigerator was moved out and Jed was sitting behind it cleaning the condenser. Loretta went around by Jed and stood beside him. She reached out, patted his head, and pressed her leg against his shoulder and said, "I'm glad you're fixing that thing, Jed." Startled, he looked up to see her smile. For a moment it was as if his mother were there—the pat on

the head, the smile, the softness against him. Instinctively, he reached out, embraced Loretta's legs, and buried his head between her knees. So ardent was his embrace that Loretta lost her balance. As she tumbled to the floor, she screamed out, "Tom-Tom-Tom!" Jed straddled her and tried to cover her mouth with his hand. The back door slammed and Tom rushed in with a wrench in his hand. He took one look, brought the wrench down on Jed's head and jerked Loretta from behind the refrigerator. Jed lay unconscious where he had collapsed.

And that's how Loretta got rid of Jed.

On Saturday morning, two days later, Jed was driving his pickup truck to Lexington, where his Uncle Frank ran a garage. He was fully aware of why he was going away. His only regret was having to leave his room in which the memories of his mother comforted him. It had been no problem for Jed's father to make the arrangements, for Frank had always wanted Jed to work in his garage.

Above the garage was a spare room. Frank always hoped to use the extra space for a machine shop, but he had not accumulated enough surplus capital to buy equipment, so the room was pretty much the way the previous owner had left it. The Thursday night Frank got the call from Tom and learned that Jed was coming, Frank's wife Myra suggested the room above the garage as a good place for Jed to live. All it needed was a thorough cleaning and a bit of dressing up to make it livable. Certainly she did not want to have Jed around her house. As she said to Frank, "I feel sorry for the young man, but I don't like to look at him or hear him try to talk."

On Friday Myra went to the garage to tidy up the room, hang curtains in the two windows facing the street, stock the old dresser with sheets and towels, and put a few dishes in the cupboard above the sink. "And, Frank," she said, "take that discarded carpet and small refrigerator stored in our basement and put them in the room. I'll be glad to get them out

of the house.”

When Jed arrived about noon on Saturday, he drove into the enclosure behind the garage where he and his father always parked. His uncle came out the back door.

“Hi, Jed.”

“Hi, Uncle F-f-f-rank.”

There was an awkward pause. Frank did not know the reason for Jed’s leaving the farm, but he figured that the baby doll Tom married had something to do with it. Anyway, he said, “Glad you’re here, Jed. Myra and I thought it would be a good idea for you to stay here above the garage, so Myra kinda got the room ready for you.” Grabbing a suitcase out of the truck, Frank led Jed up the back steel stairway, the only entrance to the room above. Jed followed him with another suitcase and a box.

Frank unlocked the door and they went in. “It ain’t much of a place, but it won’t cost you a dime to stay here. Let’s get the rest of your stuff and then you can arrange things the way you want ‘em.” In a couple more trips they’d carried up Jed’s chest of tools, a small radio, a portable TV, and several boxes. “Is there anything else down there?” asked Frank.

“My sh-sh-shotgun is in the g-g-gun r-r-rack over the se-se-seat,” Jed said.

“Okay, I’ll bring it up,” said Frank. “You can pull open those curtains and look around.”

When Frank came back, he said, “One of the reasons for moving you in here is so that you can keep an eye on the shop below. You never know, this 12-gauge shotgun may come in handy, so keep it loaded. I don’t want you to shoot anybody, but a blast from this baby would scare hell outa whoever might take a notion to fool around the shop.” He stood the gun in the corner to the left of the door and went on. “We’ve had a little trouble in this neighborhood, so when you get settled and parked for the night, close and bolt the gate. It ain’t likely anybody’s goin’ to scale that concrete block wall or the metal gate of

the enclosure, but no use makin’ it easy for somebody to snoop around.”

Jed was looking out the window. Frank walked over and pointed across the street. “You’ll find that little lunch-room a good place to eat and it’s mighty convenient. I’ll tell ‘em to treat you right. And incidentally the two radiators under these windows oughta keep you warm this winter. Well, as you know, we’ll be closed this afternoon. It’ll give you a chance to get settled. Here’s a little list of things Myra says you need and some cash advance to buy ‘em with. Over at the Mall Sears is havin’ a big sale so you may wanta drop over there.”

Jed took the money and nodded his head. His silence was a long- practiced one.

Frank looked at his watch. “Golly, I’ve got to go. Promised Myra to drive her to her mother’s in Frankfort. We’ll be there for the weekend. Here’s the key to your door and one for the back door to the garage in case you wanta go in and nose around.” Frank walked to the door, then turned around. He pointed to the curtain which enclosed a small area to the left near the door, “You gotta com-mode and a lavatory bowl up here but that’s all. You can take a shower downstairs until we get one installed up here. Take it easy –and I’ll see you on Monday.”

Jed soon heard his uncle slam the back door and then the grinding rattle of the chain as he closed the wide garage door in front. He moved to one of the windows, watched his uncle get in his wrecker, which he used to drive back and forth to work. As Frank drove away, Jed sat down in an old rocking chair near the window and looked at the list his uncle had given him: a two-burner hot plate, a skillet, a two-quart saucepan.

A whole afternoon to do what he wanted to do excited him. Unpacking and arranging the room could wait. He’d been to the Mall before, and he anticipated enjoying wandering around Sears. But his hunger reminded him of

the lunchroom across the street, so he locked his door, clattered down the stairway, and went across the street for a hamburger and french fries.

A half hour later he was parked at the Mall not far from one of the Sears' entrances. The store door he entered took him through the women's wear department. On each side of the wide aisle where customers walked through were bargain hunters pawing over a variety of apparel. About twenty feet from the entrance in dead center of the passageway stood a mannequin garbed in a blue robe.

Jed stopped directly in front of the mannequin as if hypnotized by what he saw. Her head was tilted in a coquettish turn, her arms seemed to stretch out toward him, and her eyes met his. Her smile seemed to be for him, a smile that reminded him of his mother. He moved closer toward the mannequin as if to embrace her, but a rush of customers bumped into him and he was brought back to reality. He proceeded through the department, occasionally looking back toward this marvel who had seemingly welcomed him. It was this welcome that would bring him back to the store every Saturday afternoon.

Jed soon located the hot plate, skillet, and saucepan, and with some of the money his father had given him he bought a shirt and a pair of pants. Then he strolled back through the women's department to have another look at the mannequin. There was no doubt in his mind. She still smiled at him, looked at him with affection. He had to use restraint not to talk to her, not to touch her. He went out the door of the store with the image of her on his brain.

When he got back to his room, he unpacked. He put some of his clothes in the paper-lined drawer of the dresser and hung his mackinaw on a hook above the cot. On a stand between the two windows in the front wall he set his TV and plugged it into the outlet between the two radiators. From a box on the cot he took a package, carefully unwrapped it,

and set a framed kodacolor picture of his mother beside the TV. She held in her arms a large gray cat, and both seemed to look at him, their eyes following his every move.

Jed shoved the suitcases and tool chest under the cot and hung his new shirt and pants on a hook by the mackinaw. He stored the frying pan and saucepan on a shelf below the sink, which was just to the right of the door. A yard or so from the sink an old piece of counter had been hinged to the rear wall and was supported by two wooden legs secured at the bottom by medium sized angle irons. On this he set the hot plate.

Along the right wall almost directly opposite the cot stood a large drafting table, a tall stool slid under the front edge. In the ceiling over the table was a skylight supported by a shelflike ledge, evidently an architectural alteration made by the previous owner to let in a flood of light for work at designing and drafting. Jed had brought a small lamp which he put on the table and alongside it his radio. The only other light was a bulb hanging from the ceiling, its switch just inside the door.

After he had unpacked, he went out to get a few groceries. He would plan to get his own breakfasts, maybe make sandwiches for lunch, and eat hot suppers at the lunchroom across the street. As it was Saturday night, he'd do what he usually did at home—watch TV. On Sunday he would look around the garage, clean and load his shotgun, and listen to the radio.

When Monday morning arrived, he was already in the shop when Frank rolled up to the garage door.

Frank put him to work on a transmission overhaul, a job he could do expertly.

So days flew by, and except for his Saturday afternoon visits to Sears to see the mannequin, Jed gave all of his attention to work and staying close to his room.

One evening shortly after Thanksgiving the weather turned unseasonably

cold for Kentucky and during the night about an inch of snow fell. The next morning Frank asked Jed to take his truck and pick up some equipment from an auto parts center about a mile away.

When Jed got into his truck and turned on the starter, he thought he heard a strange noise from under the hood. The motor gave a few coughs. A second turn of the starter brought a loud cry. Jed jumped out of the truck, raised the hood, and there huddled beside the engine block was a gray and black striped tomcat. The cat looked up at Jed but out of fright remained close to the motor.

"Hey, k-k-kitty, wh-wh-whatsa m-m-m-matter?" Jed said as he reached in and lifted the cat in his arms, petting and calming it. The cat seemed comforted and nestled in Jed's arms. "Wh-wh-what are y-y-you d-d-doing in m-my t-t-t-truck, kitty? D-d-did you get s-s-s-so cold l-l-last night y-y-you had to g-g-g-get out of the s-s-s-snow?" Jed carried the cat up to his room, warmed a little milk, and watched the cat eat hungrily. The cat looked scrawny and was probably a stray, so Jed decided then and there to keep it. He poured out a little more milk and left the cat in his room. He dashed back downstairs just as his uncle was coming out the back door of the garage to see what had happened. When he saw the raised hood of Jed's truck, he said, "What's the trouble?" Jed related what had happened and Frank laughed. "Well, keep the cat if you want to, but get over to the parts shop and get our equipment." Jed slammed the hood and went on his way.

That's how Jed found his cat.

In the evenings sitting before the TV, Jed held the cat on his lap. Occasionally, he propped the cat on his knee to show it the picture of his mother. "Hey, Tiger, s-s-see that c-c-cat my mother is h-h-holding. H-h-h-is name is Tiger, t-t-too." The mother seemed to smile at Jed, the cat in the picture smiled at Jed, and the newly named Tiger seemed to smile at Jed. It was one happy family. The situation to an outsider would have

seemed very queer. But there was no outsider to worry about. Theirs was a private world.

Tiger soon began to show the results of Jed's care. He found a favorite nook on the wide sill of one of the windows overlooking the street. There he washed himself, slept, and felt the warmth of the radiator underneath. One day when it was quite mild, Jed opened the window slightly and the breeze moved the curtains back and forth. Tiger pawed the moving cloth until he had shredded the edge. When Jed saw the frayed curtain, he remembered how his mother had bought a scratching post for her cat. He decided that he should provide something for Tiger's amusement and exercise.

On the way to Sears one Saturday afternoon, Jed noticed a restaurant entrance walk leading from the curb to the door. On each side of it was a row of medium-sized pine trees in green wooden kegs. Now if he could provide Tiger with a tree like those he would be doing his cat a favor. The following Sunday morning just at daylight, Jed drove his truck to the curb by the restaurant. There were no cars, no passersby. He jumped out and in a few minutes had lifted one of the trees in his truck and driven away.

When he got back to his room, he had to tilt the tree to get it through the door. Then he moved the drafting table so that he could set the tree directly under the skylight where it would get the sun. The top of the tree reached slightly above the ledge that supported the base of the skylight. A few branches brushed against the side of the drafting table.

As Jed was trimming some of the lower branches of the tree, Tiger came over to investigate. He sunk his claws into the trunk, gave a leap and climbed to the top of the tree, hopped on the ledge below the skylight, ran around it, then came back down. It was apparent that Tiger would enjoy the tree.

In the middle of the first week of December, as Jed and Tiger were watching

television, Sears announced a one-day pre-Christmas sale for Saturday, December 6. The commercial, with musical background of "Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly," featured special bargains in various departments of the store. For the women's wear department, models paraded across the screen looking very much like animated mannequins. Jed's memory of childhood Christmases flashed through his mind, a stimulus for what he decided to do—bring the mannequin to his room.

Perhaps unconsciously, Jed had already decided to kidnap the mannequin. He knew she was supported by a steel brace, the bottom of which was inserted in a one-inch square extension of a small metal plate fastened to a wooden boxlike platform. The brace was secured in the small extension by a set screw which could be removed in seconds. He knew how the brace was fastened, for one Saturday he had watched a clerk lift the mannequin up, carry her away, and then bring her back with different clothes. The thought of having her blotted everything else out of his mind.

For the next two evenings as he watched reruns of the Sears' commercials, the images on television seemed to fade into the pictures of holiday seasons with his mother. His reveries led to his belief that with the mannequin he could revive treasured moments of his past.

Saturday noon came and Frank closed up shop. Jed went to his room and washed up. He put on a clean pair of coveralls, wore a khaki cap pulled down fairly low over his forehead, and turned up the collar of his mackinaw. Then he took two blankets, spreading one out on the truck bed and laying the folded one to the side. Into one of his pockets he put a small screwdriver.

When he got to Sears, he drove the truck up to the curbing directly opposite the entrance about fifteen feet from the door, sometimes a spot used for customer loading. He entered the store. The women's wear department was busy and the aisle was crowded with custom-

ers coming and going. His mannequin as usual was not far from the entrance. Today she was dressed in a wool suit, a hat, a sparkling necklace, and a pair of shoes to match the ensemble. Jed stopped to the rear of the mannequin, stooped slightly, took his screwdriver and quickly loosened the set screw. Putting his left arm around the mannequin, he lifted her upwards. Then with his arm still around her, he walked toward the door. Anyone viewing them from the back would have concluded that a couple of lovers were making their way out. Jed moved quickly to the truck, laid the mannequin on the blanket in the truck bed, covered her quickly with the other blanket, and drove away.

Jed parked his truck back of the garage, jumped out, and quickly shut and bolted the gate. Then he uncovered the mannequin and carried her up the stairway. Leaning her against the wall, he fumbled for his key and said, "J-j-just a m-m-minute and y-y-you'll be s-s-safe and w-w-w-warm."

Once in the room, he tried to seat the mannequin in the rocking chair near the window. He had some difficulty removing the metal brace because he had to lift her skirt in order to take out the screws fastened on her buttocks. By bending her torso and her knee joints, he soon had her adjusted in a sitting position. He removed her hat and hung it near his cot. Then he smoothed her long blonde hair and sat at her feet. Tiger was curious about this new addition to the family, rubbed against the mannequin's shoe, and jumped up on her lap. Jed was delighted. The mannequin wore her smile. Tiger smiled. It was very much like the picture of his mother and her cat. That night Jed pulled the rocking chair and mannequin over by his cot and went to sleep holding her hand.

That's how Jed got his mannequin.

The days following were busy ones. As Jed and his uncle worked, the radio in the garage blared out Christmas carols and commercials reminding listeners how many shopping days were left be-



fore Christmas. In the evenings Jed visited various stores, enticed by the varicolored lights and decorations and holiday displays. He had decided to decorate the tree and buy gifts to wrap and put under it. It was to be a big Christmas for the mannequin and Tiger.

But it was not easy for Jed to buy anything. Clerks were busy, and when anybody waited on him he had difficulty making himself understood. He was treated with indifference, almost disdain. Such antipathy bred antipathy. His resentment drove him to take what he wanted without dealing with clerks. In department stores he discovered a technique that solved his shopping problems. For a quarter put into a dispenser he could get a Sears' shopping bag, then slip into the bag whatever he chose. Going out the exit with his bag was like hundreds of other customers with the same kind of bag. Sometimes he picked up such items as rings, necklaces, ribbons, and cat collars from miscellaneous piles on display counters and carried them away in his pockets.

That was how Jed got his gifts to put under the tree.

And so it was that Jed existed happily in two worlds—the one of ignitions and carburetors; the other of his room. In the garage his whole concentration was on the job. If any talking needed to be done with a customer, Frank did it. If his uncle had anything to say to him, Jed usually answered with a nod. But when he got back to his room he was in his hesitant way loquacious, stuttering excitedly to the mannequin about Christmas.

Jed often became so obsessed with the mannequin that he forgot to feed Tiger. The cat soon learned a way to get Jed's attention by jumping up on the mannequin's lap and scratching the lapels of her coat or even pawing the strands of her blonde hair.

One evening Tiger got his claws caught in the mannequin's necklace and would have pulled her off the chair had not Jed caught her and yanked the cat away. Angrily, he grabbed the cat,

opened the door, and threw him out on the steps. But Tiger's persistent scratching on the door and a few loud meows gained his reentrance, after which Jed repented and put more food in the cat's dish than usual. It was not a continual war, but it happened often enough to make Jed lose his temper and the cat run up the tree and find refuge on the ledge below the skylight. There it would stay until Jed cooled off.

On the morning of December 24, as Jed was eating his breakfast, the weather report on the radio indicated an exceptionally mild day and no snow for Christmas. He heard the garage door grind open and realized that Frank had come to work earlier than usual. Jed gulped the rest of his coffee and rinsed out the cup, stacking the dishes in the sink. The room seemed to be smokier than usual because he had burned the bacon, so he opened the window to clear the atmosphere. He moved the mannequin in her rocking chair so she could look out the window and enjoy the mild breeze of fresh air and left the radio on so she could listen to the Christmas music during the day. He poured some milk in Tiger's dish and hurried downstairs.

"Hi, Jed," greeted Frank. "I got here early so I can leave about one-thirty this afternoon. Myra and I are going to spend Christmas Eve and tomorrow with her mother. You can close up shop. Now, let's get busy on this '75 Olds so the guy can have his car this afternoon."

By the time Frank and Jed got the radiator off, repaired its leak and had it reinstalled with new thermostat, put on new fan belts and hoses, it was almost midday.

"Jed," Frank said, "run across the street and get us a couple hamburgers and cokes. Just leave the garage door open. It's mild enough to air out the shop. I'll check the plugs in this Olds and you can install new points and check the timing after I leave. The guy'll pick up his car by closing time. If he comes early, you can close early. No use stay-



ing open until six o'clock."

As Jed went to the cafe, he hoped he could close the shop early. That would give him time to get supper out of the way for his Christmas Eve. The thought of opening presents for the mannequin and Tiger so excited him that he could hardly give his takeout order at the lunchroom. As he started back to the garage, he stopped in the middle of the street to look up at his window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mannequin and wave to her. But he couldn't see her. Maybe in his hurry he had placed her too far to the left and she was blocked out of his view by the curtains, which he could see moving in the breeze. A loud horn broke his reverie and a truck sped by. Jed went on to the garage.

After Jed and Frank ate their burgers, Frank completed putting in a new set of plugs on the Olds and left. Jed finished up with the points and timing. But the owner of the Olds didn't come and Jed grew impatient. The sky clouded and it was dark by the time the customer came to pick up his car. He wrote a check for his bill, wished Jed a Merry Christmas, and drove away.

The greeting hurried Jed into action. He put the check in Frank's desk drawer, pulled down the garage door, locked it, and turned out the lights. He released the night lock on the back door and went out. Hurriedly he bolted the gate to the area back of the garage and ran upstairs.

As he reached for his key, he could hear dimly the radio in his room. He entered, closed the door, felt for the switch, and flipped on the light. He was stunned by what he saw. There was Tiger sitting by a mangled blonde wig, washing himself. The mannequin had toppled forward, face down on the radiator, where the cat had evidently pulled her while getting at the hair blowing in the breeze.

Jed ran to lift the mannequin back into her chair. Her face had been mashed by the fall and pieces fell behind the radiator when Jed positioned her. The nose, cheeks, and smile were no more. In

uncontrollable anger, Jed kicked at the cat and said, "You s-s-son -of-a-a-b-bitch!"

The cat ran under the TV table. Jed rushed to the corner by the door, grabbed his shotgun and released the safety catch. The cat ran out to cross the room, but just as Jed fired the gun the cat scooted back under the table. A second shot shattered the window to the right of the TV. As Jed pumped to another shell, the cat scurried under the drafting table and up the tree, secluding itself on the ledge below the skylight.

Jed pulled a box from under the table and placed it by the tall stool. With the gun in his right hand he stepped from the box on to the stool, but as he went from there to the top of the drafting table his right foot slipped. As he struggled to regain his balance, the butt of his gun swung into the tree. One short branch threaded its way through the trigger ring. Blind with rage, he tightened his grip on the barrel of the gun and yanked the gun toward him, his nose almost touching the muzzle. The gun fired and Jed crashed faceless to the foot of the tree. "Silent Night, Holy Night" came over the radio and Tiger peered cautiously over the ledge under the skylight.

