

5-1-2004

The Thin Red Department Store Line

Keith Tolleson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces>

Recommended Citation

Tolleson, Keith (2004) "The Thin Red Department Store Line," *Forces*: Vol. 2004 , Article 32.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol2004/iss1/32>

This Short Story is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Collin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Forces by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Collin. For more information, please contact mtomlin@collin.edu.

THE THIN RED DEPARTMENT STORE LINE

by Keith Tolleson

*"No one can find
those robot
dinosaur things.
This is our one shot,
and if you can
do this, you'll be the
most amazing man
ever."*

I don't remember exactly when I gave up on preserving my dignity, but I do know that what I'm doing now is the clearest indicator that I have none left. There's no good reason for a 46 year-old man to be standing outside of a department store at 4:50 a.m. the morning after Thanksgiving, or at least no good reason that I can think of. My wife, on the other hand, had me convinced last night that, by standing in front of a mall in sub-freezing temperatures with 150 middle-aged women, I could become a hero; "No one can find those robot dinosaur thingies. This is our one shot, and if you can do this, you'll be the most *amazing* man ever."

For a brief moment I did feel kinda like I was serving a noble cause. Maybe it was a bit heroic. After all, my kid would be the only one on the street with an E-Rex, and I would be the envy of all the frustrated parents whose kids kept asking them why Santa brought Jonathan an E-Rex but not them. Maybe it would teach

that jackass next door to work a little harder on giving his kids what they actually want for Christmas instead of spending so much time trying to turn house decorating into a damn contest every year. That's what a hero would do. Then I thought about what my father would say if I'd dared to call myself a hero in front of him. He'd say, "Boy, until you've had a bullet lodged six-inches from your balls and still managed to take out eight Krauts, you don't know jack shit about what it takes to be a hero." And then he'd show me the wound.

Over the years, my father had made it a point to let me know that I didn't know jack shit about a lot of things. In fact, just yesterday he told me I didn't know jack shit about carving turkey, jack shit about serving the right amount of gravy that goes with mashed potatoes, and jack shit about how to time my channel changing during commercial breaks so we didn't have to miss any of the football game. My wife finds it all very

amusing. I could probably do without it. But, with my father's words in mind, I decided that the acclaim I might get from waiting in line for an E-Rex was not worth risking frostbite only to get mugged by a group of soccer moms once I'd gotten the toy. That wasn't heroic, I thought, it was just stupid. When I told this to my wife, however, she was slightly less than understanding and proceeded to describe plans for me that involved kitchen utensils and certain parts of my body as an alternative. I set my alarm for 3:00 a.m.

So here I am, almost two hours into my stay on the sidewalk in front of Silver Brook Mall, with about ten minutes to go before Walker's Department Store opens for its big Pre-Dawn Sale, and I'm starting to lose feeling in my toes. I'm 35th in line, sandwiched between Jean, a wiry blonde woman who's well into her second pack of cigarettes, and Pat, a woman around my age whose girth looks to be gaining on her height. The two women became fast friends when, around a quarter till four, they discovered that they shared the same obsession for Beanie Babies. "Are you a collector?" Jean asked, smiling to reveal a tremendous gap in her yellowing front teeth.

"No," I said flatly. The woman frowned, and then continued the conversation with her new comrade. Clearly my usefulness to her has now been relegated to my acting as a target for her smoky exhalations. Luckily, my nose has been stuffed up by the cold for a good while, and I can't smell a thing. Unfortunately I can't say the same for my hearing. I've had the unique pleasure of listening to the life histories of both women for the past hour. It seems that, aside from their common interest in Beanie Babies, Jean and Pat both have three children, all cesarean deliveries, followed by hysterectomies with complications. Both also had appendicitis as teenagers, and their

favorite TV show is *Wheel of Fortune*. Right now they're debating whether or not Pat Sajak wears a hairpiece, and I'm debating whether or not to get a handgun license.

With five minutes to go until Walker's officially opens, a manager comes out of the employee entrance to address the crowd. A stocky, balding man with a thick, black mustache and a unibrow, the look on his face is the same look natives might have as they watch lava from an erupting volcano rush toward their village. His voice starts shakily, but soon develops a sense of command as he proceeds, "Ladies and Gentlemen if I could have your attention, those of you who are here for the E-Rex dinosaurs please form a line to your immediate left once you enter the store. There is only a limited supply, and we want to keep this as organized as possible. IN THE INTEREST OF FAIRNESS, PLEASE DO NOT CUT IN LINE!" He puts extra emphasis on that last part because the crowd is starting to buzz and making a slight push toward the door. Pat's stomach pushes into my back and I get closer to Jean than I'd like to be, discovering in the process that my sense of smell isn't as dulled as I'd originally thought. The store manager crosses himself and ducks through the employee door. There's another small push as a woman toward the front mentions that someone is coming to unlock the front door. "Let go of my shirt!" another woman yells. This is about to get crazy.

The two women became fast friends when, around a quarter till four, they discovered that they shared the same obsession for Beanie Babies.

When the front door is unlocked, people begin to file inside in a fast, yet surprisingly organized, fashion. Maybe this isn't going to turn into the mayhem I thought it would. Behind me, Pat is getting restless, shifting her weight back and forth, and trying her best to see over me and around me into the store. Suddenly, a woman comes running from the back of the line and darts through the front door amidst a chorus of cries from the other women demanding she be

stopped. Two more women from the back then pass by, headed for the door. This, apparently, is the sign that Pat has been waiting for. She sidesteps me and begins to make her move, but her new best friend Jean steps out and shoves her to the ground, effectively ending their short-lived companionship. Pat rolls onto her back grabbing her ankle and wailing, but no one takes notice. The crowd has turned to watch Jean who has suddenly made a break for the door. Sensing that any effort to police the line ended with Jean's vigilantism, a mad rush for the store ensues, and I find myself caught helplessly in a wave of hairspray and cheap perfume pushing me through the entrance.

Once I'm thrust through the door, I almost slip on something and look down

to see a small woman with glasses collecting the spilled contents of her purse. I pick up her compact, which was under my foot. As I hand it back to her, she looks up at me with the expression of a cat that's been thrown into a cold swimming pool, defeated and untrusting.

Regardless, she takes the compact and I rise and look to the back of the room where I see the store manager standing on a giant E-Rex display surrounded by three or four other employees and a sea of grabbing hands. I catch a glimpse of Jean pushing another woman to the ground. The manager is in a panic. Having abandoned any effort to differentiate who was in line first, he and the other employees are now simply throwing E-Rex dolls into the crowd, hoping merely to survive the ordeal at this point. Women are practically climbing on top of one another, money in hand, in what is becoming a borderline riot. I once again see the absurdity of a 46 year-old man enduring all this nonsense for a toy, and I turn and head for the door. I'll figure out what to do for the kid later. It'll be tough, but maybe I can still convince him that there is a Santa after all.

Walking to the exit, I find more and more rational reasons to leave this store. Christmas has become too commercial; the boy would break the dinosaur on the first day; and, if he didn't break it on the first day, he'd be bored with it in a week. Besides, I wasn't much older than he is when I stopped believing in Santa Claus. Was I? As I reach the door, I think of my father again. I remember a story he told me a couple of years ago during the Christmas following my mother's death. He talked about the time I wanted a real cowboy costume, the kind with leather chaps and two six-shooter holsters, and a white shirt like The Lone Ranger's; "It was all you talked about for months. We had no choice but to buy you the damn thing." My parents ordered the costume from a catalogue weeks before Christmas, just to make sure it would get to the house on time. Then, two days before Christmas, they received a letter informing them that the company they'd ordered the costume from had folded, and no shipments would be going out. Rather than have me question the

*I'll figure out
what to do
for the kid later.
It'll be tough,
but maybe I can
still convince him
that there is a
Santa after all.*

existence of Santa Clause, my mother stayed up until 4:30 Christmas morning sewing the costume, making sure it was an exact replica of The Lone Ranger's. My father ended his story by saying, "Until you do everything you can to keep your kids' dreams alive, you don't know jack shit about what it takes to be a parent." I turn and walk to the back of the store.

The manager is still tossing E-Rex toys into the crowd as I make my way toward the melee. He appears to be on his last batch, and the fighting up front is becoming more and more furious. Mall security has finally arrived, but there's little they can do at this point. The police will be here soon, I figure, so I'd better work fast. I skirt around the edge of the crowd, trying to make my way behind the display where I hope to snag a doll from one of the floor-level employees. As I reach the linoleum walkway to the side of the display, I see Jean walking in my direction with an E-Rex in hand and a gap-toothed grin on her face. Looks like her brutality has paid off. She gets about five feet from me when out of nowhere a woman flies into Jean

knocking her over a rack of corduroy pants and onto the floor. It's Pat, who's obviously gotten her revenge. The two women tussle on top of a pile of corduroy and broken plastic hangers until a pair of security guards break up the fracas and take them away cursing and spitting at one another.

Just as I'm about to turn back to the display, out of the corner of my eye, I see part of an E-Rex box sticking out from underneath the pile of pants. Jean hadn't been able to collect the toy while she was being led off by security, and it is seemingly buried deep enough to escape notice by the other women, who are still focused on the display. I manage to remain undetected as I collect the toy, go through the line at the cash register, and head home. There will be no mugging today. My boy will believe in Santa Claus after all. I do know jack shit about being a parent. And no matter what my father says about bullets, or balls, or Krauts; I got an E-Rex, and right now, I'm a hero.