

## Gentleman of Leisure

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“I HAVE had a long life,” said the bear, brushing his matted plush coat with a frayed paw, “and I once knew great joy. But all that is lost now. The last half of my life has been miserable indeed.” He twisted his body to peer out of his remaining glass eye at the mouse, and, doing so, flopped over on his nose into a thick cobweb.

“You think it was miserable,” replied the mouse, poking at a fluff of cotton that fell out of the bear, “but let me tell you, Bub, you’ve had it easy. You never had to hunt for food in the snow, or run for your life from that slit-eyed monster cat who lives downstairs, or writhe in pain and die from eating poison wheat. Miserable, eh? Don’t make me laugh!”

The bear growled weakly at the fuzzy cobweb and, with super-human effort, rolled over onto his back. “You mice and your material needs! If that was all that concerned me, I would feel gay and young again. I don’t complain about you taking my stuffing, about having only one eye, cracked, at that, or about my shabby coat. I have known love.”

“Look, Bub,” the mouse said, eyeing the rip in the bear’s coat greedily, “you talk like a human. Everybody knows that love is just one of their silly myths.”

The bear looked at the mouse so scornfully that the rodent scooted away. The bear sighed and began to dream again of the golden past.

He woke up in Timmy’s soft, warm bed. Timmy stroked his face and whispered in his ear. “You know something, Bear? It’s my birthday today. We’ll have ice cream and cake and presents! You can help me blow out the candles. Three of them!”

Timmy was opening his presents. All the relatives were there. First there was a truck. Then a boat, and some building blocks. A box of crayons, and some clothes. Last of all, the big box from Grandmother. But the bear could feel himself growling. The gift was another bear, just a little bit bigger and fuzzier, with a richer brown coat and a ridiculous blue ribbon around his neck.

After the relatives had gone, Timmy’s friend, Roger, came over from next door. The two boys admired the truck, the boat and the blocks. Then Roger found the new bear.

“Teddy!” he squealed, and hugged the bear closely. The older bear gazed contemptuously from under the chair where he had been kicked. He had never had a name.

“That’s my new bear,” said Timmy. “We don’t have to bother with that old dirty one any more.”

“Let’s put him someplace where he won’t get in our way,” said Roger. The boys picked up the old bear and pushed him back into the darkness of Timmy’s closet.

There were many days after that in the dust curls behind the block box. The bear often heard Timmy talking to the new bear. At night he could hear the little boy crooning to him in bed, just as he used to do with the old bear.

One day there was great commotion in the house. Presently Timmy's mother opened the closet door. "Show Susie your blocks, Timmy," she said. "Remember, she's only two years old and we have to show her where the toys are."

Susie fingered a few blocks, then pulled the box out from the wall. "Oh!" the little girl squealed, "Bear! Bear!"

Her sticky hand pulled the bear into the light and he felt as if he would like to blink. She crushed him to her chest. He could not understand the strange words she used, except for the repeated cries of "Bear!" but the sound of her voice was beautiful. She pulled him up with her into a rocking chair and sang to him out of a tattered book. He could feel his cotton stuffing swell and fluff. He had almost forgotten what a beautiful, warm feeling it was.

But Susie was soon called away. She kissed the bear goodbye tenderly and laid him on the chair with a soft pat. The bear heard voices telling Susie and her mother goodbye, and then the front door slammed.

Timmy came into the play room. "Oh, that dumb old bear!" he cried. "Teddy and I don't want you around any more!" He pushed the bear back into the closet as far as he would go, beyond the block box, underneath the plastic garment bags that hung clear to the floor.

A long time later, Timmy's mother began taking clothes out of the bags and putting others in. The bear heard her say it was spring. The bags grew heavier and the bear was squashed flat against the floor. The next thing he knew, a long, fuzzy thing poked into the corners behind the garment bags and he was pulled out onto the floor of the room.

Timmy's mother shook her head. "You awful looking old bear!" she said. "You belong in the attic."

A cobweb floated across the bear's one eye. Something jabbed at his rip. "You're back," he said to the mouse.

"Go on with your stupid dreams, Bub," said the mouse. "My nest needs more cotton." He pulled a huge chunk of stuffing out of the bear's stomach. The bear felt a draft. Soon he would be nothing but hollow skin.

He looked after the scurrying mouse. "Who's to know," he sighed, "who's to know? Which of us is the fool?"