TOY EYES

Grief Waits Patiently On The Bottom Shelf

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Four of them wait in the dimness—pale blue, orange, cherry red, pale pink. Otherwise identical, fleecy polyester covers squishy fiberfill interiors. Dome-shaped, with fluted bottoms and a size that used to be comfortingly full to a preschooler's arms. Each with cartoonish black and white fabric eyes sewn into the fabric, eyeballs averted as if all four glimpse a surprise to the left.

During closet cleaning, she senses these eyes staring from the bottom shelves. Fixed in their inanimate gaze, memories of a kindergartener swarm her. She heeds their prompt, turns her head to follow their stares, and spies her son's lidded pine toy box against the bedroom wall. More than 20 years ago, it was his first birthday present. So clever she was—coming up with a gift to last a lifetime. In college, it could hold books at the foot of a dorm bed. For a first apartment, a funky coffee table. Now, it's almost empty. Unused. In his supported housing, there's no room for it. Care staff don't want it. She could put the plushie ghosts with their big eyes in the chest, but she never opens it—they'd be truly forgotten—she wouldn't have the bittersweet surprise of remembering when the Pac-Man video game stuffies were the "it" toy. How she'd made him a Pac-Man costume for Halloween that year. Pac-Man-themed fifth birthday party on their lawn, with a few little friends from school. She'd even found pebble-sized Pac-Man party favours for the kids. A homemade Pac-Man birthday cake.

He loved how, with their batteries engaged, his ghosts toddled down the hallway from his bedroom, bashing into obstacles before wavering in another direction. His autistic brain delighted in their haphazard movements. She loved how they were one of very few toys that enticed his curiosity and motivated him to play with a friend. Difficult to source on the internet and expensive didn't matter, they charmed him—they were worth the effort and expense.

Her eyes start to sting. Pressing her lips together, she squints ceilingward—knows from practice this will help keep tears in. There's no percentage in weeping—stop it, she tells herself.

She wants to grab each colourful blob and pull them off the shelf—yearns to squash all four in her arms like she used to. But that would unleash more sadness. She remembers collecting them from the floor after children lost interest during playdates. The toy eyes peer at her from the dark. Today—her cleaning tasks suspended—she still feels the imprinted hug of spongy polyester comfiness.

Tiny lopsided wheels on their undersides waddled them forward. Their ataxic movement mirrored his own myopathic gait. He didn't understand how to turn them on—and the list of daily therapy tasks to be taught, practiced, and retaught was long enough—so rather than teach him, she did it. Every time he played with this toy, she witnessed it. How often had she pushed the little on/off button for him? Experienced his laughter and merriment.

Rag in hand, she stands immobile, staring at the cheerful colours, her cleaning agenda dropped. Other childhood toys were donated and recycled long ago, but these whimsical creatures were hard to part with, so she didn't. Memories of his joyousness tether to these toys. There were enough hard things concerning him. Biopsies, MRIs, unmet childhood development markers—his life narrowing with each passing year. Keeping these toys bestowed her comfort, so why not? She hasn't noticed them in months, but today, with him gone, they study her.

For a time during high school, retro video games like Pac-Man were cool—something he could share with neurotypical classmates. The digital display on his Android phone replaced his closeted stuffies. YouTube videos on uninterrupted loops elicited that same preschooler's chortle but with a baritone warble. As a teenager, more sophisticated digital maze runner games attracted him, but the eponymous character, with its round shape, pizza-slice giant mouth, and ghosts, still held delight.

She fixes her gaze with the toy eyes. Was there ever a Pac-Man stuffie? She can't remember. How did the toy ghosts exist without their yellow maze runner? Or was the child supposed to be Pac-Man? She remembers his delighted chortle from deep inside and how these ghosts were just the funniest, most magical things in the world. He taught her that. How to enjoy that sweet interval. Nothing existed except that particle of time, together. But their shared hour has passed. She shelves her memories with the ghosts, knowing that leaving the quartet untouched will help tears stay where she wants them to.

She closes the closet doors and settles on his toy box, resting in nostalgia and gratitude for the joy he revealed to her. Hope too—that with others, he experiences similar delight.