

Out of the Box

All Change



Old bear yawned and stretched his arms, showing dark love-patches on the worn sandy fur around his middle. His usual awakening grin spread into a broad smile under the snub nose. The passing years could be seen in his sunken cheeks and tattered, chewed ear, but time had not dulled the glistening light in his eyes. The bewitching hour had come. That hour, just after the last stroke of midnight, when toys in every loving household come alive – just for one hour.

Old bear looked round the dusty nursery. There were few visitors these days. The room had taken on a sleepy, forgotten atmosphere, except for this one hour when moonlight shone through the dormer window, surrounded by an entourage of stars,. A low magical light was just bright enough to show the peeling wallpaper with its floral patterns and animals interspersed with scripted letters of the alphabet. Old bear watched a moon-ray twist its way into the golden hair of 'rag doll' and observed again how the sky changes pattern every night, but the patterns all come round again in time.

'It's not fair!' The rag doll, guardian of justice in the nursery, grumbled as she did each night. 'They're prisoners. We should get them out!' She was referring to the heavy boxes to the left of the faded blue door. There were toys in them – friends from long ago - who could never come out and enjoy the midnight waking-hour. The hour was only for those who were out in the room.

'And how do we get them out?' The big red fire-engine asked the same question every night, and rag doll gave the same reply. 'You're the emergency vehicle. You think of something. You get them out! Why don't you and that tank you spend so much time with, ram them and break the boxes open?'

Now, on cue, it was the rubber snake's turn. He had curled himself. He slithered around secretly. No-one knew where he would pop up next. It could be quite unnerving. 'If they come out,' he hissed. 'How do we get them back again. While they're in the boxes they're asleep and don't know what it is to be awake. It's better to leave them. Wake them up and there'll be all sorts of problems.' For some unknown reason nobody argued with the snake

'I suppose if we opened one box, we'd have to let all the others out too!' The voice came from the circle of soft fluffy toys sitting together in front of an empty fireplace. It was the dark brown teddy bear. He was one of the newest members of the nursery family and was only just feeling able to join in the conversations.

'Of course we would!' replied rag doll in his most scathing voice, which made it quite clear he though new-comers should wait to air their views. 'It's not fair,' he muttered again.

Old bear had heard it all before. 'If we can't do anything about it there's no point in getting upset over it,' he assured himself. 'Perhaps snake is right.' He stretched and yawned again. He yawned a lot these last few years. This time the torn leather pad on his right paw caught the low cupboard door behind him. The door sprung open and a long cardboard box slid out beside him, its lid falling forward pulling a length of blue tissue paper with it. The box was followed, with a loud clatter, by a wooden railway engine. It was still coupled to a carriage which was dragging a naked doll. Her left foot had become entangled with its wheels.

The whole nursery watched as the partly open lid of the upturned box was pushed to one side. Very slowly, a tall doll, dressed in a magnificent lace ball gown and flowery bonnet, kicked her golden-shoed feet out, rolled herself over the side of the box and stood up. She walked shakily to the dolls chair opposite old bear and sat down, carefully arranging her long auburn hair around her shoulders. She turned to glare behind her at the engine which was still rolling slowly backwards, dragging the carriage and the naked doll.

'You pushed me out!' she declared.

'It was the way I had been pushed in,' the engine tried to explain. 'I couldn't see where I was going.'

'Trains **can** go backwards,' observed old bear.

'But engines have their eyes at the front.' The engine had a feeling that no-one understood trains. 'We go backwards because we trust the rails, and somebody's taken them away.'

Old bear did not believe in long arguments. It was like gnawing a bone when all the meat had gone. He looked at the doll who was now settled in the chair fanning herself. 'It's Lady Caroline, isn't it?'

'It is!' came the haughty reply. 'It was last time we met, and it will be next time. You know very well who I am,' she snapped. 'I haven't become someone else just because I've been shut up in that horrid box.'

Old bear was familiar with Lady Caroline's tantrums, although he had been spared them for a long time now. In a way he had missed sparring with her. It used to be an interesting and exciting diversion some nights

when no-one had a story to tell. 'It's good to see you again.' His tried to make his smile widen still further.

'So it should be!' she replied. 'Why haven't you helped me out of the box before. If old bear had been totally honest and wanting to be hurtful he would have explained how relieved the whole nursery was when she had been packed away in the cupboard. But that was not his nature and deep down he felt a slight pang of regret.

Lady Caroline had now recovered from her shock arrival and was surveying the nursery. Every toy had eyes fixed on her, - watching, - silent, - not sure what to expect. She was still looking at old bear. 'You've lost a bit of fur since I last saw you.' Bear folded his arms quickly across his middle. 'I don't recognise many of these people. There must have been a lot of changes. I must have been away a long time. The room's the same but so dowdy .. the servants should be told. I can't believe the housekeeper has allowed it to become like this'

'There isn't a housekeeper, or a servant anymore.' It was the rocking horse who had the longest memory in the room. 'It's the children's room and there aren't any children anymore. No-one's had a ride on me for years!'

'Nonsense!' Lady Caroline stood up tall, brushing her gown out of the chair behind her. 'It's MY room! It should be kept clean!'

Without another word the rocking-horse shut his long eye-lashes and rocked.

'There's a draught in here.' Lady Caroline pulled her shawl tighter and began a tour of the room, stopping first at a half finished Lego castle. 'What are these?' She kicked a Lego piece which squealed, while at least fifty voices asked, 'Are you speaking to us?'

Lady Caroline ignored them and continued an over-the-shoulder conversation with old bear.

'They're building bricks,' explained old bear. 'Whole cities and even space stations are built with them.'

'Bricks? They're not proper bricks! Look at them. They have nobbles all over them. Are they ill? Is it catching?'

The wounded Lego piece had found its voice. 'We're made like that so we all fit together securely.'

'Huh.' In my day there were proper bricks made of wood. They all fitted together all right. They didn't need bumps all over them. A small Lego cannon rolled meaningfully across the castle tower and pointed in Lady Caroline's direction, but she had already dismissed the matter.

At that moment the naked doll who had been in the cupboard, finally extricated her foot from under the railway carriage and shrieked in delight.. Lady Caroline turned to see what the noise was.

'For goodness sake, girl, put something on. There are gentlemen present.' She waved in the direction of the sailor doll whose eyes were already double their usual size. Old bear stirred himself and rolled on to his feet. In no time he had stripped a blanket from the cot against which he had been leaning, and handed it to the embarrassed doll. She wrapped it round her, covering even her toes, and peered out sheepishly, evading the sailor dolls' stare. 'I used to have clothes,' she murmured apologetically to old bear, 'but the little girls kept taking them off and putting them on again. Last time they forgot to put them back on. Thank you, old bear.'

Old bear settled down again, but not before Lady Caroline had observed more changes. Back in her chair and attracted by someone giggling, she looked straight at the teddy bear with pink ears and a purple neck-ribbon. 'Who are you?' she fired at her. 'What ARE you?'

'I'm a teddy bear.' The reply was expressed in an extremely offended tone.

'Teddy! You're not a proper teddy bear! There aren't any girl teddy bears!'

'Yes there are and yes she is.' Old bear quickly rose to his friend's defence. 'She's new in the nursery. She's different, but she's a bear and we all love her.'

'Of course, you would say that. She's one of your kind.'

Old bear, by nature patiently gentle and compassionate, was suddenly enraged by Lady's Caroline's unjust arrogance. 'At least we don't dress up in fine clothes and put on a posh growl.'

Lady Caroline was not one to miss having the last word. 'She has a purple ribbon round her neck. Isn't that dressing up? A posh voice is a sign of good breeding. A growl's a growl however you say it – and it's bad manners too!'

Old bear gave the teddy a reassuring wink, s though to say, 'Don't take any notice.'

Several of the nursery company were smothering laughter, but the now respectfully covered doll could not contain hers and laughed aloud. The blanket slipped from her shoulder. Lady Caroline glared at her. 'You get a ribbon round that too, my girl. You'll catch your death of cold.' With that everyone felt free to laugh.

Old bear tried conciliatory tactics. 'You'll be seeing lots of changes tonight your Ladyship.' He said softly.

'Changes! Everything's changed! Even you look much older!' She rose again from her chair and, gliding across the floor, stopped to stare down at her feet. 'At least the carpet hasn't changed! Same holes in the same places!' She sniffed and looked up to the window-light. 'Even the moon's not so bright as it used to be.! Old bear was about to say something about window cleaning, but wisely let the moment pass.

The group of soft toys had turned themselves round now.

'You're all new,' was Lady's Caroline's greeting as she looked at them closely.

'We're the cuddly toys!'

'Silly things! Whatever next! We used to have real toys like wooden soldiers. Where are they?

'We're real,' The toys were indignant. 'All the children play with us. We are always here for them when they're sad or sleepy, or ill. We're their comfort.

'I can see why they call you soft,' snorted Lady Caroline. 'Toys are not for cuddles! They should be here to educate children and help people notice them. When I used to be taken out in the park, everyone stopped to talk because they saw me!'

The brown mouse was near to tears now, but Lady Caroline had moved on. She had seen the pile of sock-puppets. 'And what do you do?' she asked in an even more pompous voice.

'We're sock-puppets!'

'You mean you've been on people's feet?' Ugh! She twisted her mouth in disgust.

'No! On people's hands. The children put their hands inside us.'

Lady Caroline gave them an uncomprehending stare. 'Hands in people's stockings. Whatever next!'

Her ladyship had worked herself into a very irritable and irritating frame of mind. 'And what do you do here every night? We used to play games – chess and draughts.' The black cat spoke up. 'I remember. We don't have those games now. They're put away in the cupboard. Lately the children played games with pictures on the television.'

'Television?' Lady Caroline sensed she really had arrived in a changed world.

'It's there,' said the black cat. 'The big box in front of you.'

'Games? On that? What an ugly looking thing!' She was not at ease when confronted by things she did not understand.

'We have to wait till someone turns it on,' added the cat.

'We can have music though.' It was the floppy-eared rabbit's turn to show his knowledge.

'Music! How lovely. Let's have some music. Who will play?'

'I will,' said the rabbit.

'You! What can you play?'

For answer the rabbit hopped to the C D player beside the television and patted it with his paw. Lady Caroline spun round as a blast of pop music filled the room. Immediately the whole group of soft toys were on their feet, rocking together while the rabbit beat time with his back foot.

'Music! Music!' screamed Lady Caroline. 'That's not music. Stop it at once!

Rabbit pressed the button again and after a few seconds of silence, Lady Caroline had recovered enough to say, 'We used to have proper music. Concerts for the children. Mr. Peter played his violin. You remember don't you, bear?' Old bear nodded. He quite liked the new music so long as it was not too loud.

Lady Caroline went on. 'The last time Master Peter came in he was a grown man. He came with a friend. They were both in their army uniform. It was the last time we saw him.' There was a longer silence during which the tank hummed army tunes to himself.

Lady Caroline seemed pleased to see the farm animals were still around, though when a lamb bleated, 'We remember you!' she looked as though there was a bad smell under her nose. 'And I remember you,' she replied, and then to herself, 'Farmyard types. Dirty, noisy things. I remember that horrid cockerel!' She continued to walk slowly thoughtfully round the room. Ignoring the television she tapped the drum, stared hard at an enormous collection of inter-galactic vehicles and characters, rolled a few cars with her foot, and then stood still, staring at the faded wallpaper. She gave a huge sigh before walking back to her box. Gathering her gown around her, she climbed in and lay down. 'Old bear,' she called. 'Tuck me in and close the lid. There's too much change for me.' Obedient but with no need to be told twice, old bear carried out her wishes. He carefully laid her tissue paper round her, pulled the box lid into place, and gave it a final securing pat with his paw.

The whole room sighed - a sigh of relief and sadness. At last old bear broke the silence. 'We've five minutes left,' he said. 'Let's sing.' Everyone joined in and the nursery rang with the sound of old favourite nursery rhymes - the old ones - the ones which just don't change!