

The Gathering Place

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By Ben Gadd¹

Three days to Christmas, and the mall was packed. Ida was tall, and that was an advantage, but she was also rather stout, which didn't help her in the crush. "I'm getting too old for this," she thought. "Next year I'm just going to do it all by mail order."

She reached the toy store and worked her way over to the doll section. Last week there had been twenty "Homesie" dolls there. They had been hard to come by, the clerk had told her then, but the manager had a secret source. They were going fast. Did she wish to buy one right now? No, Ida had replied. The Homesies were expensive, and payday was a week off.

But now it was payday, and there she was, staring at an empty rack. She looked toward the sales counter. Several women were yelling at the clerk. The poor girl was practically in tears.

So was Ida. She left the shop.

Ida wiped her eyes and went down the hall to the food court, where she stood in line for tea and a bun. Spotting an empty table, she walked as quickly as she could toward it. A young man got there just before she did. She started to look for another table, but he smiled pleasantly and said, "There's room for two, ma'am." She sat down. The young man opened a paperback book.

Ida sighed. Well, that was that. There wasn't going to be a Homesie doll for little Erin this Christmas. Ida turned sideways in her chair to face the wall. She hunted in her handbag for a hankie. Resting her head on her coat sleeve, she cried softly, unheard amid the clatter of the cafeteria.

And she fell asleep.

It was the cold she noticed first. She had been complaining of the cold since Halloween, but this! This was the cold of an ice-age winter, a thousand generations back.

She was dressed in animal skins, the furry side turned inward. No longer fat, she was lean and strong—she could feel her muscles move beneath the fur.

She looked around. There was no food court. There was no mall, no city. Instead there was a campsite in darkness, with a fire. Around the fire sat other people. Her family. Here was Julia, her grown-up daughter, and peeking from inside Julia's skins was the face of Erin. Tears had dried on Erin's cheeks.

Julia was speaking to Ida. "It's her doll, Mum," she was saying. "Erin lost it today, somewhere around the pass."

The doll! The one Ida had made for her just two days ago, to bring to the winter solstice celebration. Now it was gone. Poor Erin. The other children would all have their dolls. Everyone would be at the Gathering Place tomorrow, and Erin would have no doll!

Erin saw Ida's worried expression and began to cry again. "Shhhh, Erin," Ida said softly. "I'll find your doll." Erin sniffled and gave her a smile of hope.

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Ida walked over to her pack. From it she pulled an extra cape of light fur. “I’m off,” she said casually.

“You’re actually going back?” Julia’s eyes were wide.

“Yes.”

“Now? At night?”

“Yes. I think I know just where she dropped it—where we stepped over the brook, you know—and it’s not far. I’ll be back before the moon’s down.”

Ida took her staff and started back along the snowy trail. The path stood out boldly, a ribbon of white between the black walls of the woods. She looked up toward the moon, full against the snowy forest. The doll ought to be plainly visible, provided that no one had stepped on it and forced it down into the snow. She would check every footprint if she had to.

The path steepened, but she walked easily on, full of the enduring strength that comes with age. How many times had she been over this pass? How many times had she gone to the Gathering Place to celebrate the solstice with the rest of her clan? She had lost count.

Ida’s eyes searched the trail before her. Her feet felt for anything of the right size.

At length she lifted her head and saw that the trees were shorter. The snow was deeper. She looked up the path, seeing how it cut across the barrens ahead like a trench, her own tracks coming toward her from the gap between the hills. And not twenty paces along the path was something sticking out of the snow. The doll!

She ran. She picked it up. Yes, it was the doll. But it was only half the doll. The head, carved so carefully from the leg bone of a stag, was missing. The head—the small, white head—was lying somewhere in the white, white snow.

Ida sat down on a rock, the headless doll in her hand. What to do now? “Can’t take her the doll like this. Have to find the head, that’s all.”

A long time after, when the moon was more than halfway across the sky, she stopped looking. She was not going to find the doll’s head. She had been over the pass twice, on her hands and knees in the snow. She was tired, now, very tired, and the cold was beginning to hurt. She would have to return to the campfire.

Well, what she could not find she would make anew. Ida tucked the headless doll under her cape, and she walked quickly back to camp.

As the others slept, she opened her pouch of tools. She laid out the shapes of worked flint in front of the fire, their edges gleaming sharp. She reached into the family’s meat bundle, knowing that there was a deer’s leg-bone in it. She scraped away the remaining meat, put it back into the bundle, then walked a little way off from camp. With a stone she found under the snow, she deftly broke the round head of the bone free from its shank. She returned to the fire, drew some bedding around herself and began to carve.

The next morning was bitterly cold. Normally the family would have waited under their covers for the sun to warm them, but today was special—it was the winter solstice—and they would have to get up well before dawn to reach the Gathering Place in time.

Ida rubbed her eyes. Her hands were still greasy from working the bone. She had finished the doll’s head only a moment ago, it seemed, for she had fallen asleep immediately after. She reached into her pouch and withdrew the head. Truly, it was a beautiful face, even better than the original. The new bone had been perfect: softer than the first piece, and more even, too, without any hard spots or holes.

She fitted the head to the body, carefully slipping the neck down into the rolled-leather torso. She bound the hood of the tiny cape over the head. The doll was whole again. Erin would be happy.

And now Erin was awakening. “Granny?”

“Good morning, Erin. It’s the winter solstice.”

“Granny? Did you find my doll?”

“Yes, dear. I did. Here it is.”

Erin took the doll and pressed it against her chest. She slipped down under the skins, giggling.

“Thank you, Mum,” Julia said. She touched Ida’s hand.

“Oh, it was nothing. We’d best be off.”

Quickly the family collected their things and began walking down to the Gathering Place. Before long they could hear the crackle of the blazing hardwoods, and then they had arrived. The others welcomed them with hugs and laughter.

“Ida! Oh, Ida,” cried the matriarch of the clan, squeezing her tightly, “Julia told me what you did last night. Again you have shown what kind of people we are! You honor us, Ida, just by being here.”

“It was nothing,” Ida heard herself saying again, as other friends and relatives gathered around.

At that moment the sun rose. The first ray flashed over a far hill, lighting the whole valley in an instant.

Ida turned away from the fire and into the brilliance. She felt its friendly power on her face. She turned back to the matriarch, her eyes streaming from both the brightness of the sun and the fullness of the moment. “It was nothing,” she repeated, her voice breaking. “Nothing, really ...”

“Beg pardon?” The young man had put down his book. He was looking in Ida’s direction.

She pulled her head up, away from the wall. The sleeve of her coat was wet. One hand still clutched a wadded tissue. She dabbed at her cheeks with it.

“I—I fell asleep,” she said. “Must have been dreaming. Sorry to disturb you.”

“Oh, no problem. I do that a lot.” He smiled. “Christmas shopping just totally wipes me out.”

“Well, this dream was a lot harder than any Christmas shopping *I* ever did,” Ida said.

“Your dream? That dream you just had? Where you were talking out loud?”

Ida nodded.

The young man continued. “I just finished a course about dreams and stuff. I’m up at the university,” he said proudly. “Second-year psych. I mean, you don’t have to tell me about it if you don’t want to. But it would be cool to hear about it.” He sounded eager.

Ida considered. Should she talk to this boy? He seemed friendly enough. Oh, why not; it was Christmas. She told him about her dream.

When she was finished, the student bobbed his head several times. “Wow,” he said. “You got that story right out of the memory banks of, of ...”—his hands waved in front of him—“of, like, the whole human race.”

“Yes, I suppose so. And yet it was all so *real*.”

“I envy you, ma’am, having a dream like that. I’ve never had a dream like that.”

Ida smiled a sad smile. “Well, real life isn’t working out like that dream, I’m afraid.”

“No?”

“No. In real life I can’t fix the doll. What I mean is, I can’t find the doll I promised my granddaughter for Christmas.”

The student reached into the shopping bag beside his chair. “I’ll bet it was one of these, right?”

In his hand was a box with a window in the lid. And in the box was a Homesie doll. Ida’s hand went to her mouth. She blinked and nodded, speechless.

“Yeah,” the young man said, “I just got the last one of these over at Top Shelf Toys. You went there, right?”

Ida nodded again.

“You know, I saw how many people wanted them? They were just grabbing for them—I mean, like, pushing each other around and stuff? It was gross. And I sort of had a greed attack and bought two of them.” He pulled another Homesie doll from his shopping bag. “And, like, it’s for my little sister, okay, and she only needs one, so ...” He put both dolls on the table, in front of Ida.

“You mean ... ?” Her eyes were popping.

“Yeah, so which one do you want?”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that—” she began.

“Sure. Hey, you’re lucky you ran into me, right? Just like in some dumb Christmas story, right?” His arms were waving again. He laughed. “Hey, the system works!”

“You’re sure?”

“Yup.”

Ida had her handbag up on the table. “I’ll pay you double,” she said, pulling out her purse.

“Oh, no, lady. Those dolls are a rip-off in the first place. I mean, they’re cute and all, but jeez.” He was searching in the shopping bag for the receipt. He found it. “Seventy-five bucks for *this*?”

Ida located four twenties in her purse and handed them to the student. “God bless you, young man,” she said.

He grinned. Then he put his book into his shopping bag. “Well, it’s time to leave. They’re closing.” He stood up.

Ida hadn’t noticed the lights dimming the first time, but now they dimmed again. She tucked the Homesie doll carefully into her shopping bag. “Just like packing up my furs at that—that camp,” she thought. The dream was coming back to her again. The family, so close and loving. The cold. The path in the snow, the moonlight, the pass. The doll’s head. Ida rubbed her hands together. They felt just as tired as they had in the dream.

She picked up her bag, looking one last time at the doll in its box, and she joined the line of weary shoppers leaving the mall. This procession, she knew, was normally a sad one—often you couldn’t find the right gift at Christmas, and the people in the stores at closing time were mostly the ones still looking—but for Ida the story was different. She would remember this day, with its awful disappointment, and its amazing dream, and the even more amazing thing that had happened after. She would remember this day for the rest of her life.

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