

I'm Not Sniffing Your Children

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I was first arrested in a toy store on December 20, 1997. Because it was the Saturday before Christmas, the store was mobbed, and I had been maneuvering in the store for most of the morning, trying desperately to find some privacy. Finally, I was alone in the aisle with all the war toys, standing on a low shelf, reaching for the top shelf and a clear plastic tub of little green soldiers. Right beside the tub of green soldiers was a tub of khaki-colored soldiers. The label read, "Desert Storm Troopers!" They were marked down from \$9.95 to three bucks. But I didn't want that tub.

I was standing in the aisle, the tub in my hands, pulse throbbing in my ears and the not unpleasant swelling of anticipation enlarging my chest, about to pry open the lid, when I sensed someone behind me. At first I didn't turn around. Then I heard something. The squeak of sneakers on the industrial-strength vinyl floor. Then a sniffle. A kid.

I turned. He was seven, maybe eight, arms hanging like twigs from his oversized, outdated California Raisins t-shirt. He was a dirty kid, the kind of kid you knew in school who always wore third generation hand-me-downs and smelled stale, like he slept in the family clothes hamper. You would guess that he had never had a haircut if you didn't notice his rat tail, the long, thin braid of hair dangling between his bony shoulder blades. I looked at him and knew the smell of that limp, rotten-wheat-colored hair, hair that looked and smelled as if it had been used weeks ago to strain tea. I knew the smell of his breath, too, and the smell of the sheen of dried snot on his upper lip. I even knew the smell of those sneakers, an anonymous brand, scuffed white rubber and canvas, cheap. Garden variety poor kid, white trash. A little ambassador of olfactory surprises. He stared at me with that complete lack of self-consciousness that only the young, the stupid, and the stoned can manage.

I stared back. The kid's eyes studied me like I was some kind of bizarre insect found under a rock. He looked at the tub of soldiers in my hand. This was a kid who played with the khaki-

colored soldiers. In my day, the khaki-colored soldiers were the Japanese, the enemy. Gray Nazis and khaki Japanese. They should have smelled different, too, those soldiers of evil, different than the way the green soldiers smelled, but that was probably too much to ask, given what they had to work with back in 1967.

What did he want? Should I climb back up and get those other soldiers for him? I didn't know if I could manage it, I wanted so badly to pull the cellophane tape from my own plastic tub and to pop the seal on the lid, then to get my nose down there to savor the aroma of those little plastic green army men. I had been working my way toward this day for most of the past week, even though I didn't even know it. Who knows, indeed, where one's nose will lead?

The kid twitched the corners of his mouth, clenched his fists, then seemed to stretch out his neck like a telescope so that his face seemed to move several inches, maybe even a foot, closer. Then the kid screamed. At first it was unintelligible, just an inarticulate wail, a tortured sound for a kid his age, then words.

"Here! Here! I found him! Come on, I found him! I found the pervert! I found the pervert!"

A chill shot up my back and I really did feel my permed hair stand on end.

The kid kept shouting: "Come on! Come on! I found him!"

A sheriff appeared at the end of the aisle, speed-waddling for all he was worth. He shouted, too: "Move it, Kenny! I told you stay down by the front of the store!"

The sheriff grabbed Kenny's wrist and jerked him away from me. "Ow!" the boy cried, and he began a slow, petulant walk to the front of the store, his body hurt less than his ego.

The sheriff walked slowly toward me, half in a crouch, his right hand near his gun. He said, "Son, put the bucket down, and let's you and me talk."

It seemed a reasonable request, but I couldn't do it. I said, "Let me take the soldiers with me."

The sheriff looked surprised. He was close enough now that I could read his name: TUBBS. "I just want to talk for a minute," he said. "The soldiers 'll still be here."

"I have to take them with me. I'll pay for them."

Sheriff Tubbs kept inching closer. "Will you let me carry the bucket for you, then? We'll go right on down front, and you can check out."

"No, I have to hold them. I'm going to open them right now. I'll do it slowly."

I don't know if Tubbs though that plastic soldiers were some kind of weapon, but he had his hand on his gun now.

[And this is where we quit! Who knows . . . maybe we'll pick it back up one day. . . .]