

THE TOY BOX DIRECTIVE
by J.A. Willoughby

My sister and I shared a toy box when we were young. One reason for that was that we didn't have many toys. Our parents were of the blue collar type, post-WWII, Eisenhower era and they provided for us very well, considering what little money they had. We were happy children and oblivious to any financial hardships they may have endured.

We never lacked the necessary things in life. Being children of Depression Era children was an advantage in our lives. We became thrifty and efficient. Luxuries, like the newest trendy toys, snack foods and soft drinks, were not common items in our young upbringing. We had what we needed.

A few days before Christmas our father asked my sister and me to look into our little, shared toy box and pull out anything that we did not want.

What? There's not that much in there to begin with!

He insisted. Obeying his mysterious directive, we worked together digging through the few toys we had in our homemade container. I don't remember specifically which toys she and I chose that day. I am sure that they were broken ones; three wheeled cars, one-armed dolls, a tail-less horse, and headless plastic Army and Viking figures that made their way to the "exit" pile. Imperfect as those playthings were, they were a part of us. Some had names and they "spoke" to us daily. I do remember that it was very difficult to say goodbye.

Why is he doing this to us??

The toy box directive was satisfied and there was a pile of surplus toys that our dad was putting into a box. The mystery of why we were asked to do it had somehow driven us past our sentimental attachments to the things; we did it because we wanted to find out his reason for it.

Are we getting more toys? Sure. Santa is coming soon. We have to make room for the new ones. That's it!

Yes, that was it -- but there was more.

Why is he asking us to put on our coats, and go out and get in the car?

My sister and I sat in the back seat of a 1955 Mercury and rode for, what seemed like, all afternoon. It was actually ten miles through an area we had never seen before. We gawked out the windows at the unfamiliar scenery as it whizzed by. It felt like we were being transported to another world.

Rides in the car were a treat for us. Usually, they meant we were going for ice cream or the Drive-In for a movie. Sometimes, it would be a slow ride in the quiet countryside, looking for deer. On a day when everything seemed perfectly picturesque –the sun was shining, the air was still, there were animals grazing and you could hear the sound of a stream nearby babbling over the rocks – dad would pull off the road, shut off the car and roll the windows down. Then he'd say, "This is God's country". That remark always made me a bit uneasy, thinking that maybe we were trespassing and something bad was going to happen at any moment.

That's why he turned down the radio and shut off the car and got really quiet? So God wouldn't know we are here?!

Eventually, we arrived at our destination a bit confused. We weren't at an ice cream stand, a drive-in or sitting along the road trespassing on Divine land. We parked in front of a run-down house with barefoot children and no coats standing on the porch. I saw my dad reach across the seat and pick up the box containing the toys! I hadn't seen him put it there and it surprised me. He opened the door and told us to "wait here", and he got out.

With his left arm cradling the box, he approached the house and walked up the steps to the porch. A man came out of the door to greet him as a woman stood in the doorway. They shook hands. My sister and I craned our necks to see over the high bench seats of the car's interior. They talked for a while and dad set the box down on the porch. Across the red dash and through the windshield of the car, we watched as the children's arms *dove* into the box and pulled out our discarded toys. They held them up the air, smiling and laughing, and hugging them. My sister and I looked at each other in disbelief

The memory ends there, sitting in the car looking in astonishment through the windshield at these strange children enjoying our broken toys and dad walking back to the car. I have no recollection of the ride home or if anything was said. Recently, my mother was able to shed some light on the details of that day.

It was a simple yet painful explanation for that family. The man had lost his job. The family had only enough money to survive and none for Christmas presents. Our dad took the initiative to do something about it.

She told me we did that the following year, too, then the family moved away. That was it - an event of only a few minutes in my life has endured for over half a

century. The looks on those children's faces never went away. I saw them then, as I remember them now -- very, very happy. That's the way it should be at Christmas.

Our dad walked his usual walk back to the car, leaning slightly to one side, due to an old football injury. He may have had a slight smile on his face when he slid in behind the wheel. He was clean shaven, as always. His hair was neatly combed, slicked back, showing his premature receding hairline. He looked nothing like Santa Claus. But seeing what I saw him do that day, that's who he looked like to me.

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