

PRETTY PAPER DOLLS

Mrs. Pruitt met the father and daughter on the wide front porch of her two story brick house and opened the door to let them enter. “Look at this little angel. Come in. I’m Mrs. Pruitt. Welcome to your new home.”

Her four-year old mind puzzled over the woman’s words. What is this lady with the frizzy red hair saying? Her daddy held her hand a little tighter and shook his head at the matronly woman who greeted them. Then, they followed her into a long room, which seemed much larger than the room with couches and chairs at the little girl’s home.

Mrs. Pruitt smiled at her. “Would you like some milk and cookies?”

The child shook her head. “No thank you. My mommy doesn’t feel good so we have to go back and take care of her, right Daddy?” She looked at her father for reassurance.

He let go of her hand, sat in a faded-brown, overstuffed chair and lifted her onto his lap.”Let’s stay and visit awhile. Look, Mrs. Pruitt brought you a treat,” he acknowledged the woman now standing in front of them with a plate of cookies. Kate pulled her knees to her chest. Arms wrapped tight around her legs, she shrank back and turned to snuggle into her father’s shoulder. He held her close as he fought to keep his composure.

“I don’t want a cookie.” The muffled words came from rosebud lips pressed against his jacket. Eyes squeezed shut, she pushed her

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small, heart-shaped face tighter against his shoulder. “I want to go home. Mommy needs us. She was crying when we left.”

“Hush.” He gently turned Kate’s face from her hiding place. “You mustn’t be rude. Mrs. Pruitt is offering you a special treat.”

“Are they chocolate?” Kate asked, refusing to look at the plate or the lady holding it.

“Um, I think they are oatmeal.” Daddy smacked his lips in pretend appreciation.

“No,” Kate whispered and clung tighter to her father.

He hugged her close and said, “Just try one, Katie.”

“I only like chocolate.” Kate’s small voice, strong and definite, filled her father with sadness.

Kate didn’t want to leave the security of her daddy’s lap but a large box, full to the brim, of paper dolls Mrs. Pruitt placed in the middle of the room was too tempting. Slowly, she slid to the floor. Small feet clad in black patent leather shoes, a strap across the instep, walked gingerly toward the box. The room was so big. The ceiling seemed as high as the sky. Well, not really, the sky is higher than the whole world, her young but logical mind reasoned.

The room seemed scary. As she turned toward the cardboard carton, she tuned to look over her shoulder at her daddy. The ugly brown chair sat close to a fireplace filled with dead ashes. Another worn chair was placed on the other side, a small table next to it.

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Turning back to the middle of the room, Kate viewed it from end to end. The front door, in the middle of the room opened onto the front porch. Windows on each side of the doorway were covered with cream-colored, lace curtains. Blinds of a darker shade hung behind the curtains. A large radio stood to the right of the door and next to it, a couch that matched the chair where her father sat. Small tables were scattered throughout the room and covered with dollies, the intricate lace patterns catching Kate's brief attention. Tears began to glisten in her large blue eyes and a scared feeling fluttered in her tummy. "Daddy, can I bring the paper dolls over by you?"

"No, Katie. Keep them where Mrs. Pruitt put them. The box sat at Mrs. Pruitt's feet. Making certain she kept her distance from the strange woman, Kate knelt at the opposite side of the carton. "Oh!" Her eyes opened wide as she found it filled from top to bottom with paper dolls and pretty clothes to dress them in. "Daddy, come look. Have you ever seen so many paper dolls?"

Just then a small, strong, willful voice came from an archway into the living room. "You can't touch them" A plump little girl with red, frizzy hair ran to Kate and pushed her away. "They're mine You can't touch them," she repeated. Mrs. Pruitt spoke up, "Kate, this is my daughter Alissa. She is just a year younger than you. She's going to be your new sis..., ah, your new playmate. Alissa, be nice to Kate and share your paper dolls." Mrs. Pruitt knelt down and pulled Alissa into a

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hug. “Isn’t my pretty little girl going to be nice and welcome her new friend?” Mrs. Pruitt looked over Alissa’s shoulder, a cool glance directed toward Kate as she consoled her own, distraught daughter.

After watching Kate play quietly for a while with Alissa who had finally agreed to share, her father stood to leave. Kate dropped the paper doll she had dressed in an evening gown and ran to his side. She put her hand in his. “Is it time to go?”

“Katie, listen. I have to take your mommy to the doctor. I want you to stay here with Mrs. Pruitt and Alissa”

“But I want to come with you.” Kate clung to his leg. He gently pushed her an arm’s length away. “Katie, this is going to be your new home for a while. I want you to be a big girl and not cry. Can you do that for me?”

She nodded her head yes, swallowed the sobs that lay heavy in her chest, and turned back to the box of pretty paper dolls.

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