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The building sat vacant for years.

It was old, and there was a ‘for sale’ sign in the window that looked as if it had been placed there a long time ago. The windows were dirty and grease-stained. My friends and I never paid much attention to the building; we’d pass it on our way to school, but we had no reason to give it any more notice than a casual glance. It was on Southeast Broad Street, sandwiched between *Captain Whipple’s Famous Ice Cream* store on the left, and *Lost Soles*, a second-hand shoe store, on the right. Dad said the old building used to be a hardware store. But that was years ago, and I never

remember it being anything more than an old building in its final stages of disrepair. I suppose every city has a building like it, and I figured that one of these days someone would tear it down and start fresh. Maybe they would construct a new building and open a clothing store, or perhaps a book store.

I was wrong on both counts. The building wasn't torn down, and what opened in its place wasn't a clothing store. It wasn't a book store or a hardware store. It wasn't a restaurant or a deli or a dollar store.

It was a *toy* store.

Now, I have to admit, I was surprised. I thought a toy store would be really cool, especially if it wasn't just a toy store for little kids. I've been in some toy stores that have really cool things like model rockets and airplanes, games . . . all kinds of different toys. Maybe the new toy store would be like that. I hoped so.

My name is Eric Carter, and I live in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. I was born in Nashville, but we moved when I was very little. I've always liked it here. I like the people, I like the weather.

I like my school and my teachers. I like my family. Oh, sure, sometimes my little sister, Madeline, really bugs me, but as far as little sisters go, she's pretty cool.

What I *don't* like are toys. Not anymore. Not since what happened at the toy store. But to understand everything, I have to start at the very beginning . . . the day something very strange happened when I walked by the old, decaying building downtown.

# 2

The day began like any other. It was summer, and it was hot. That's one thing you can count on in Murfreesboro, Tennessee: if it's summer, the weather is going to be steamy. I don't mind at all. Summer is my favorite time of the year.

I got up and went into the kitchen for a bowl of cereal. Madeline was already awake and out of bed. Still in her pajamas, she was sprawled out on her belly in the living room, watching cartoons on television. When she's watching cartoons, it's nearly *impossible* to get her attention. I think the house could fall down around her and she wouldn't notice. Unless, of course, she couldn't see

the television.

While I was eating my bowl of cereal, Dad came into the room. He's a mechanic for a car dealership in Murfreesboro, and he was wearing his dark blue pants and blue shirt with his name embroidered on it. My dad's name is Richard, but everyone at the dealership calls him 'Wizard' because he can fix almost any car. I know it sounds like I'm bragging, but my dad really is *that* good when it comes to fixing cars. His friends are always bringing their cars over to our house when they're having trouble with them.

"Hey, Big E," he said, ruffling my hair with his hands. That's what Mom and Dad call me: Big E. They've called me that ever since I can remember. They don't call me that *all* the time, but a lot.

"Hey, Dad," I said.

"What's up today?" he asked.

"Me and Mark and Shayleen are going fishing," I said. "It should be a good day for it."

Mark Bruder and Shayleen Mills are friends that live on our block. Shayleen and I will be going into fifth grade at Hobgood Elementary this year;

Mark will be going into fourth. We fish in a small ravine not far from where we live. Actually, it's only a small pond, and very few people know about it. But there are lots of fish in it, and some big ones, too.

"Well, bring home a couple of big fish for dinner," Dad said. "I'll see you tonight."

"See ya," I said.

Dad turned to the living room and looked at Madeline on the floor. "See you tonight, little lady," he said. Madeline just stared at the television. She was so engrossed in cartoons that she didn't even hear him. Like I said: when she's watching television, it's almost impossible to get her attention.

After Dad left, I returned to my bedroom, got out of my pajamas, and put on shorts and a T-shirt. When I returned to the kitchen, Mom was there.

"Did you get some breakfast?" she asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "I had some cereal. Can I go fishing with Mark and Shayleen today?"

"I don't see why not," Mom said, "but there's something I'd like you to do for me, first."

*I hope its not the windows*, I thought. Earlier in the week, Mom had mentioned she wanted me to clean all the house windows, inside and out. It's not a real hard job, but it takes a long time.

"Can you run down to the store and get me a few things?" Mom asked.

*Cool*, I thought. *That'll be easy*.

"Sure," I said.

Mom scribbled a short list on a yellow piece of paper and handed it to me, along with some money.

"And I want change back," Mom said. "Don't spend it on candy, like you did last time."

"I won't," I said. "I'll be right back." I was glad Mom asked me to run to the store, instead of asking me to clean the windows. That would have taken a couple of hours, while going to the store would only take fifteen minutes.

I left our house and walked across the lawn. The grass was shiny and wet with dew. The sun was burning bright, and the morning was already very warm. Sprinklers sprayed water onto glistening green lawns. Hidden birds called out from trees. It was going to be a great day.



I walked up the block and rounded the corner. Soon, I was downtown walking along busy Southeast Broad Street. Like most mornings, it was filled with cars and trucks as people drove to work.

And I don't know how or why the old building caught my eye. I'd passed it a million times before, and I hardly ever paid attention to it. It always looked the same.

Today, however, something had changed. I noticed it right away, but I couldn't put my finger on just what was different.

I stopped walking and gazed at the dilapidated building. Traffic hummed behind me on the street, and I heard the tired sigh of a truck's air brakes.

*Something is different*, I thought. *What is it?*

I stared for a moment, until I finally realized something: the sign in the window of the old building had changed. For as long as I could remember, there had been a dirty yellow '*for sale*' sign in the window. The sign itself was every bit grimy as the building.

Now, the *for sale* sign was gone. In its place was a brand new sign, all shiny and colorful. I was

too far away to read it, so I walked over to the building and stopped. I gazed at the sign the sign.

*Opening Soon!* it read, in big, red letters. *Maxwell's House of Terrific Toys! The finest, most wonderful toys in the entire world! Strange and magical toys and games! You name it, Maxwell's got it!*

Beneath the words were cartoons of various toys: a Jack-in-the-Box, a ragged doll with red hair made of yarn, a model airplane, and a train.

"A toy store!" I said out loud. "That'll be *awesome!*"

And I really *was* excited. Not only was it going to be a new toy store, but it would be close to my house! I could go to the store any time I wanted!

I re-read the sign in disbelief. My mind was whirling, and I was so focused on the sign that I didn't even see the huge reflection of a monster in the window . . . until the thing was already upon me.



By the time I saw the reflection in the window, the thing was already lunging for me. I spun around to dodge the attack, but it was too late. Mark Bruder had already wrapped his hands around my waist.

“Gotcha!” he exclaimed as he squeezed once, then let go.

I turned and looked at his reflection in the glass. Because the window was so old and dirty, it made his reflection appear to be something it wasn’t. In fact, Mark’s reflection was much larger than he actually was. It had really freaked me out.

“You got me, all right,” I said, and I pointed to his reflection in the window. “Look at yourself

in the glass. You look like an ogre.”

“Hey, that’s cool!” Mark said, raising his arms in the air. His reflection in the glass looked really crazy, like he was ten feet tall!

“Ready to go fishing?” he asked as he dropped his arms to his sides.

“Yeah,” I said, “but I’ve got to run to the store for my mom, first.”

“I just saw Shayleen,” Mark replied. “She’s got to clean her room. I told her to come over to my house in an hour, and we can head to the pond from there. Can you make it?”

“I’ll be there,” I said. “I’ve got to run to the grocery store for my mom.” Then, I pointed at the window. “Did you see the new sign?” I asked.

Mark nodded. “I saw it last night! A toy store will be sweet!”

“For sure,” I said. “I hope it opens soon.”

We said good-bye to each other, and I started walking. I thought about the new toy store.

*When will it open? I wondered. What kind of toys will be there?* The sign said there would be all kinds of toys from around the world. It would be exciting just to walk through and see them all.

And I'd been saving money all summer. I do odd jobs around the neighborhood: mowing lawns, raking, things like that. I even opened up a savings account at the bank. Every month they send me a letter in the mail called a 'statement.' The statement told me how much money I had in my bank account. So far, I'd earned almost forty dollars since school ended.

After getting the items Mom needed from the grocery store, I started walking home. Mom didn't really need a whole lot, and everything fit into a single, brown paper grocery bag that I carried with one arm.

As I passed by the old hardware store, I again looked at the sign and wondered when the toy store would open. Maybe it was written on the sign, and I missed it when I'd read it earlier.

So, I walked up to the window and read the sign again, looking for anything that would indicate when the grand opening would be.

Nothing.

I took a step to the left and looked at my reflection in the old glass. In the window, my form was distorted and large, and I remembered how

freaked I'd been when Mark had surprised me.

And it occurred to me then, that in all of the years of walking by the old building, I'd never looked in any of the windows, and I had no clue what was inside the crumbling building. I had no reason to.

Now, however, I was curious.

I took a step closer and gazed through the filmy, grease-stained glass.

The building was empty, except for one very strange thing: in the center of the old store stood a doll. She had dark brown, curly hair with two blue ribbons tied in it. Her dress was also blue, and she was wearing matching blue shoes.

But, what was so horrifying was the fact that the doll was *moving*! Her eyes were blinking and her mouth was moving up and down! I couldn't be positive, but it appeared she was staring right at me. I could hear her speak, too, and I leaned toward the window and listened.

What I heard her say was nothing less than terrifying.

"*Eric*," the doll was repeating, over and over again. "*Eric . . . Eric . . . Eric . . .*"

My eyes bulged, and my jaw dropped. My arms went limp, and the bag of groceries tumbled to the cement and tore open. Items scattered around my feet, but I didn't even notice them. I was too shocked, too horrified to take my eyes away from the bizarre doll in the middle of the empty store.

*"Eric . . . Eric . . . Eric . . . ."*

A nightmare was coming to life, right before my eyes!



I blinked my eyes several times as my thoughts spun wildly out of control.

*How did that doll get there? How did it know my name?* In school, we read a book about dolls that came to life in Delaware. I had nightmares after reading it . . . even though it was just a book. I knew it wasn't *real*, but it still creeped me out.

There was nothing else in the building, except for some old shelves covered with a frosting of gray dust. Even the floor was layered with a dirty film of powder.

But in the dust, I could make out a single pair of footprints that lead across the floor and



vanished into a dark room at the back of the building.

*The doll had walked to the center of the room!*

It was impossible! The doll had somehow come to life and was now standing in the center of the old hardware store, blinking her eyes at me and calling my name.

*“Eric . . . Eric . . . Eric . . . .”*

A large form suddenly appeared as a reflection in the window, and I turned around. A woman had been walking along on the sidewalk, and she strode up to me.

“Are you all right?” she asked. She sounded very concerned.

“Yeah,” I said, and I suddenly realized I’d dropped the groceries on the ground. The bag had split open, and the things I’d bought for Mom were strewn all around my feet.

“I guess the bag slipped out of my hand,” I said, and I knelt down. The woman also knelt down and helped me pick up the groceries. Thankfully, the things I’d bought—some spices, a bag of frozen vegetables, cake mix, a can of ground black pepper, a bag of peanuts, and two red

peppers—weren't damaged. It's a good thing I hadn't bought anything in a glass jar. It would've shattered for sure.

"It doesn't look like anything is damaged," the woman said. "Here. The paper bag isn't torn too bad. I think you can still use it."

She handed it to me, and I cradled the bag in one arm. Then we began piling in the groceries. If I was careful, I would be able to carry the bag home without dropping anything.

"There," she said, after all the groceries were secure in the bag. "That should hold until you get home."

"Thank you," I said.

"What were you looking at, just then?" she asked.

"A doll," I said. "Look."

The woman leaned toward the window and I turned and peered back inside.

*The doll was gone!*

Not only was the doll gone, but there was another set of tracks in the dust, coming out from the back room. They lead right to where the doll was, then returned to the room in the back of the

building!

Suddenly, I felt really foolish. “I . . . I guess I must’ve just imagined it,” I said to the woman.

“Well, be careful with your groceries on the way home,” she said. Then she walked away.

I continued staring into the store through the grimy glass.

*What’s going on here? I wondered. Where did that doll come from? Where did she go? How—and why—was she calling my name?*

And so, I decided something right then and there. I still had time before I had to meet Mark and Shayleen, so I decided I would take the groceries home to Mom. Then, I would come back to the old hardware store to see if I could find anything out. Of course, I couldn’t go inside, but maybe if I looked around in the back, behind the building, I would find a logical explanation for what I had just experienced.

After all: dolls really can’t *talk*. They can only speak words they’re programmed to say.

Still, the doll’s voice haunted me. I could still hear her words in my head as she repeated my name over and over.

*Eric . . . Eric . . . Eric . . . .*

I walked away, and I never saw the eyes that  
were watching me the whole time.

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