

Dave would have sighed when the thrift store opened, if any part of his anatomy allowed him to. He had no reason to think today would be any better or worse than any other day, but the eternal optimist within him figured that there were always new ways for the world to fuck him over.

When he'd first been donated he'd been put in the big glass case under the counter, the owner apparently predicting a fast sale given his size and uniqueness. But it'd been at least a month since then, and when he hadn't shifted fast he'd been put closer to the back with the rest of the fifth-hand toys to collect dust. On particularly lonely nights Dave wondered if any of his shelf-mates were suffering silently like he was, though of course he had no way to tell.

It wasn't like Dave didn't know why he was slow to sell. He might not have been able to see himself, but he figured his various aches and pains probably had some visible cause. His deaf ear, the various itches and pinched spots across his body, not to mention the soul-deep ache that he'd been forced to admit came from the tail he now had... he wasn't going to be anyone's first choice, and at this point he was a little glad of that fact. He'd earned a cushy retirement, he figured.

If only to stave off going insane, he forced himself to start paying attention when the antique bell above the door rang. It was unusual but not unheard of to get a customer within the first ten minutes, but generally it just ended up being an old friend of the owner or someone getting the address mixed up with the coffee shop next door. Nobody who came in far enough for him to see.

It seemed more like the first this time, the hum of conversation going on a little longer than normal. Dave was sat the wrong way for his good ear to pick up the words, but at least he had enough of his senses to feel it when footsteps unexpectedly moved further into the store. What, did this guy want to look at the rusty spoons or something?

Then the customer rounded the corner where Dave could see him, and he couldn't find the right thoughts for a long minute.

How the fuck?

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Bro nodded to Marshall behind the counter when the store finally opened and he could step in out of the sun. Normally he didn't make an effort to get to these stores early, but there hadn't been many new listings to go through in the morning, and if he'd stayed home doing nothing he would've started spiralling again, so he made himself get up and go a few minutes earlier than normal.

"Mornin', Ambrose." Marshall was a nice enough guy, even if he tended to use more words than Bro would have needed. "That time of the month again, huh?"

To be fair to him, it was. Normally he came in on the first, but this month that had been a Monday, and Mondays were always for trawling the new Goodwill stock, so this visit had

been delayed. Still, he couldn't delay too long, not if he didn't want his find getting snatched out from under his nose. "Sure is," he agreed bluntly, with a spare shred of politeness since Marshall was honestly a good sort. "Got anything new in since last time?"

"Nothin' recent, but I think Jess put up a few donations the shelter rejected, so I can't be sure. Y'know I'd put this holy grail 'a yours aside for ya if you actually told me what it looked like?"

"Can't remember, sorry." Maybe if he had more of an idea what he was looking for, he wouldn't have to spend so many hours casting a wide net every day. "I'll know it when I see it, though."

"Well, go an' see if you do." Marshall waved towards the row Bro knew contained the kids' toys, still going through the motions of unlocking the rusty old register he never got around to replacing.

Bro was happy to do just that. The shop wasn't large, but it still had enough soft toys and dolls to warrant an entire wall of shelving in the back. Even so, Bro knew everything above eye level had lived there longer than Marshall's own daughter, so he could write half of the space off and focus on what he could see as he paced the row.

He wasn't really expecting much, truth be told. Maybe in those first few months it'd been fair to think he'd find what he was looking for close to home, but after the first year he'd only kept coming out of a need for routine. He was much more likely to find a hit on one of the auction sites, the net widening by necessity every month as the possible travel range increased. All he could do was keep editing his searches and hope he found something before there were too many listings to-

Black glass caught the light in the corner of Bro's eye.

Bro was back across the aisle fast enough to make his hair ruffle slightly, tracking the reflection back to its source. It wasn't uncommon in the grand scheme of things to find a toy with glasses as a part of its design, or maybe even featuring a prop pair attached over its eyes, but the collector in him knew that real glass, even shatterproof and rounded off, was a rarity in a child's toy. Solid black glass aviators were as clear a signal as he'd found yet, even if the toy they were on made his heart ache.

Sitting just below eye level on one of the larger shelves was a fluffy-looking golden retriever plush, its limbs arranged as if it was begging for a treat or preparing to jump upwards as a trick. Bro estimated it to be about the size of his torso, large enough that the handful of rips in its stitching were readily apparent. Its fur was solid yellow all over with a slight darkening to indicate its paws and ears, but even on a first inspection he could see a half-dozen spots where it was matted down, the victim of any number of potential splashes that hadn't been properly cleaned off. The paws didn't have any torn stitches, but the dark black thread that was meant to separate out each toe was more than half missing, his left hind leg in particular dangling a single depressing black string from a cheap patch job.

Picking it up carefully - and wincing as the left ear flopped a little more than its stitching should have allowed - he turned it over to examine in more detail. The aviators that had clued Bro in were attached to the sides of its head with a pair of professional handmade stitches, standing up to the test of time better than some other parts of it. There was a large decal of a record stitched into its stomach, though that in itself didn't mean anything - Bro still had a whole duffel of music-themed toys to repair and rehome once his most important project was brought to a successful close.

What was more likely to tell him what he needed, Bro knew, was the tush tag. Spinning the toy the rest of the way around, he found it under the water-stained tail, holding on for dear life with half of its stitching pulled as if someone had tried to rip it right off. Smoothing it out carefully, Bro lowered his shades to take in the label sewn straight into the tag - and that was when he knew.

*Strider Plush Toys Co.*

*mfd. 2019*

*"can i stay the night here on my way home?"*

Bro's breath left him in a choked wheeze, his hand tightening instinctively around the toy's middle as if someone would come to take him away. He looked around at the thought, giving into his paranoia, but nobody else had come in yet and Marshall was still behind the counter.

With nobody to judge him, Bro brought Dave close in a gentle hug, the toy's plush chin tucked against his shoulder as he let himself shudder through his next few breaths. "Holy shit. Not in the best shape, lil man, but - you made it home. I got you now, I'll take care of everythin' now."

Relaxing his hold on Dave after a minute (and, to be honest, once the smell started getting to him), Bro looked him over for a price tag. Thankfully the store used paper tags instead of stickers for anything fabric, and he found the small slip tied with butcher's twine around one of his paws. Twenty bucks, and under any other circumstances Bro would've told someone off for the poor valuing, but in the moment he was more interested in beating a hasty retreat to the safety of his apartment.

"Hey Marshall," he called out across the store, "you got that register open yet?"

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Dave somehow looked both better and worse once he was on Bro's worktable. On the one hand, it was a relief that none of his fluff had slipped out in the drive home, and no new problems had revealed themselves. On the other hand, the solid and direct light above the table revealed just how many stain spots he had, and the slight discoloration to some of them was uncomfortable to even look at.

"Normally I'd give you a full refurb, make it a big welcome home thing," Bro told Dave as he gently snicked a few more stitches with the seam ripper, "but I don't wanna get into the

moral question of if this fluff counts as you, and it's in pretty good shape. So I'm just gonna put it aside and reuse it once you're washed."

Once he'd created a wider opening to work with, he emptied Dave's stuffing out into a small bowl for later - first with his gloved fingers, then using a pair of tweezers to chase out the last bits until he was confident he'd gotten everything. He also gently pulled the stitches holding Dave's shades on, putting them on top of the pile and leaving the dog a floppy pile of cloth.

The sight of Dave in that state was alarming to say the least, so Bro quickly moved on. He'd pre-prepped a second bowl with cold water and detergent, and carefully submerged Dave until he started to saturate. "Seen some second-hands that need a few runs of this to get all the stains out, but I think you're gonna be fine with one," Bro spoke half to himself as he began slowly prodding and squeezing where the most visible stains were located. "None of these look like paint or anythin' tough, just lil kid stuff."

He worked with each stain in turn, squeezing and applying gentle pressure with a few separate cloths to coax the stains out. There were tough patches of mud on Dave's back paws that quickly loosened but left difficult dark splotches in his fur, and as he worked Bro realised he'd need to replace more of the stitching than he'd first thought, the pale threads having darkened from stains that would never come out from a hand wash.

Two hours of tiring but rewarding work later, Bro was ready to lay Dave out on a fresh towel to dry. He brushed all of Dave's fur flat to start, then carefully waved a hairdryer over him for a few minutes, ensuring its heat was as low as it would go. Once he felt Dave had dried as much as this would allow, he brushed Dave out again and laid a second towel over top of him to soak up more moisture before pushing his chair back and burying his face in his hands.

Dave was back. He'd *found* him. Four years of searching thrift stores, online auctions and charity bins, growing more sure each day that he'd never actually find him, but only growing more determined to keep looking because of that, and now he was back. Whatever Dave had gone through, however many owners he'd had, he'd gotten back home in one piece, in a salvageable state, and that left Bro free to quietly break down.

(How many days had he spent worrying that he wasn't looking for the right thing? That he'd misremembered Dave's colour, misjudged what shape he'd take? How many nights had he dreamt of Dave sitting alone and unfound in a dumpster somewhere, counting down the minutes until he'd be buried in a landfill with no chance of discovery?)

But it had paid off. As if it was fate, or just Dave's sheer will to be found, he'd turned up right under Bro's nose, and now he could start to put things right.

Taking another shuddering breath, Bro stood up and went to decide on thread colours.

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Dave tried not to pay attention to the specifics of his repairs, because that was a type of body horror he had no stomach for (literally, haha), but he could still feel the effects it had on him.

Once he was clean and dry, an itch went away that he'd had for so long he'd forgotten it existed. Being unstitched had replaced his awkward pinched feeling with a novel but equally unpleasant sensation of insubstantiality that only grew worse when his stuffing was removed. Once he was washed, however, the sensation of Bro's slow, even stitches was a relief, returning him to a baseline he'd forgotten existed.

(He didn't really understand the point of the tiny plush heart Bro tucked in amidst his stuffing, since those were meant to be made from a toy's original stuffing and his hadn't been replaced, but he couldn't deny it made him feel warmer.)

Having the stitching of his paws redone in tight, straight lines took away phantom joint pain he'd resigned to living with. Re-attaching his ear properly to his head - learning that it had been almost ready to fall off and he hadn't even known was *terrifying* - had returned his hearing to wonderful stereo, and meant Bro's voice was no longer reduced to a mumble when he turned Dave over onto his good side.

The only piece of damage Bro had done himself, the stitching on the sides of his head was easily replaced. Dave's vision once more darkened satisfyingly, making the white light above the worktable bearable and leaving Dave feeling much more himself.

Finally, the part Bro was apparently the most apprehensive of, the tush tag.

Dave wasn't sure why this was such a big deal, and from Bro's mumbling neither was he, but Dave couldn't deny a certain level of apprehension as he watched his bro thread one of his smallest needles with an almost invisible white thread.

"Dunno why you've got one of these in the first place, but the last thing I'm gonna do is let a piece of you just fall off, yeah?" Bro's voice was barely audible, coming out through a clenched jaw as he visibly pushed himself into that space of absolute perfection he demanded of his work. He stopped speaking entirely a moment later, as Dave felt the first soft poke of the needle against his tail.

This wasn't like any of Dave's other repairs that day. All of those had had a physical effect on him, relieving aches and curing ailments in a way that was logical, if not sensible. With his tag, though, it seemed to go deeper, affecting him in a way he just couldn't grasp.

With every stitch Bro repaired (because somehow, here, he felt every one), Dave felt himself... slowing. If he was human, maybe he'd have felt the blood stop rushing in his ears, or his pulse stop hammering in his chest. Without any of these physical responses, all he was left with was the sense that he was being grounded back into his body; a sentiment that would have been unwanted, if Bro hadn't spent the last five hours methodically returning that body into an inhabitable state.

The final stitch was such a relief that it left him feeling lethargic, hardly paying attention as Bro lifted him up and once more turned him over, examining him for any last imperfections. There was something comforting in the way Bro's hands held him, with all the love that a snotty kid could muster but none of the roughness of their sudden tugs and grabs.

"Looks like that's everything, least for now," Bro murmured, setting Dave down lengthways across his lap. "You're good as new, lil bro. Or at least, new as you were when..."

Bro's voice cut into a deep sigh, the mask of detachment Dave knew he'd been wearing slipping off for the first time since he'd grabbed Dave in the store. Lifting him up again, Bro hugged Dave against his chest, his neck pressing lightly into Dave's back.

"I'm sorry I didn't find you sooner, kid. And that I lost you in the first place. I don't - I dunno what I can do, really, but whatever it is I'll do it. I'll get you back for good, or make this better for you, or - hell, just, whatever I can do for you. And you'll be safe here, no matter what. You're home now."

For once, Dave was glad he couldn't speak - if he could, he had no idea what he would've said to such an open remark. Maybe it was his muteness that let Bro say that in the first place, but either way he felt his mind struggling to catch up as Bro stood and carried him to another room.

The sight of his bedroom didn't mean much to Dave at first, with every familiar shape covered by a plain white sheet. He watched as Bro pulled off the sheet covering the bed, revealing it to be dust-free and neatly made, still with the same sheets Dave remembered from his last night sleeping in it.

Carefully, as if he hadn't just unpicked him and put him back together, Bro set Dave on top of the blankets with his side leaned against his pillow, facing out towards the hall. "I'll figure out what to do tomorrow, I promise. For now, I think we both need to sleep for twelve hours or so, huh?" Bro's lip quirked minutely, the reassuring mask of confidence back in place. "Night, Dave."

Bro turned and left, flicking off the bedroom light but leaving the door open. A minute or so after he went, Dave saw him lean in again, hardly visible past the half-open door, as if to confirm Dave was still there. But then he left again, and the apartment was quiet.

Dave didn't know what to do. Nothing, obviously, he couldn't have done anything if he tried. But he was back now, finally, on the bed and against the pillow he'd been missing for four years. His bro was in the other room, putting away his work things before bed, and below him the distant rush of traffic sounded as it always had in his memories.

What was anyone supposed to do, when they finally returned home? Sitting there, chest full to bursting with some warm emotion, Dave decided the only thing to do was shut his brain off and sleep.

After all, he'd still be there in the morning.