

THE HUMMEL STORE

Christopher t. Minori

She stares at the clock's face, watching the hands slowly chase each other. An intense loathing for the clock engulfs her; she wishes she had the strength to tear it from the wall and toss it onto the street below. She hates that clock. Time is her enemy.

Her name is Traci, and it's not, as it is with many, that she is old, and fears the passing of each minute. Traci is quite young; only in her late twenties. Although not beautiful, she is not unattractive. But she is quiet, and shy; the type of person who can be in a room for twenty minutes before you even realize that they have entered. Traci never speaks to others unless they have spoken first, and then, only in soft tones. But most of all, Traci is very, very alone. And it is for this reason that Traci hates the clock. Not because it is one minute closer to death, but because it is one more minute she has lived.

Traci sits, barricaded behind a tiny desk in her office. She is a receptionist for this firm; she has worked here since she graduated high school twelve years ago. She does not particularly like her job, but she does not know that she could do anything else.

There have been a few men, but each encounter has been less than satisfying. There was never any love. Each time, it was mainly an attempt to find companionship, but in the morning, as she dressed in a strange bed-room, she felt more alone than ever. Some people were not meant to find true love, and she knows that she fits in this category.

Traci turns away from her computer, and looks once more to the clock. It is eight o'clock. She has been at work since seven that morning. She is off work at four, but rarely leaves before eight. There is no over-time pay involved. She merely stays in order to eat up

more of her time. She can picture the journey home that is taken each night. A long walk through the city streets to a small apartment, occupied only by herself. Her apartment is small, but she keeps it tidy. She does not have a lot of possessions. There are a few things she has collected over the years, but nothing of major importance. In one corner of the living room, sits a ten gallon tank. The water is clean, due mainly to the fact that she only has one small goldfish. She meant to buy more, had originally intended to fill the tank with exotic fish, plants and colored gravel, but she had never gotten around to completing the project.

In one corner of the room stands a large curio cabinet. Within this one corner, a lamp is set up, shining so as to show the objects within the cabinet in the best light possible. This is her Hummel collection, each figurine is perfect, and it is only when she sits gazing at her children that a smile may play across her face. It is only at these times when she feels happy, imagining the story behind each little statuette.

Traci stretches, and gathering her belongings, leaves the office. She takes the same walk she has for twelve years, and as always, does not keep her mind on her journey. She knows the way by heart, could most likely make the trip with her eyes closed. Little thoughts flutter through her mind; things she could be doing, places she could go, but each thought leaves just as quickly, never fully formed, as another pushes it out of the way.

Traci gets the feeling something is different. She has walked through this neighborhood for years, and for the first time, senses a change. She stops walking, and pulls her coat tight. It has suddenly gotten chillier, as if a cold wind has suddenly blown about her, yet the air is still. Looking around, she does not notice anything immediately. It is not until she looks across the street that she sees the store. She is certain it was not here yesterday, could not, in fact, have been here this morning, for surely she would have noticed it on her way to work. And yet, here

it is, just the same. She crosses the street; smiles for the first time that day, and looks at the store.

From the outside, it appears to be just one more broken down second-hand shop. Traci always enjoys browsing these type of shops, where special deals can be found, and everything can be bargained. Some of these places have signs in the windows that say “antiques”, some say “junk”. In this neighborhood, both words have the same meaning. But this store, this is a special place. Traci stares at the fading sign that hangs from the gutter’s eave—The Hummel Store.

She pushes open the entrance door. A bell dangling from the ceiling jingles as the top of the door brushes against it. A solitary cashier is the only other person in the store. She looks up, smiles, but doesn’t say a word. She knows the type of customer who enters this place doesn’t want conversation, they want to believe they are alone in this dream world.

Although it is a small store, it seems immense. Hundreds, maybe thousands of shelves line the walls. On each shelf, tiny little soldiers, children, townspeople stare back at Traci, each one shouting, “Choose me! Choose me...”. She picks up one of the figurines. “Goose Girl”; she knows this one, has seen it many times before, a pretty, graceful little thing, but she quickly replaces it on the shelf. She, like many others before her, is searching for a treasure. One of the hard to find, mispriced figures that she can take home and love and think about how she almost stole the piece at the price she paid.

Crossing towards the back of the store, she picks up another figurine. A little soldier, this one, a bit more rare. She stares at the price tag-- \$350. Not a bad price, but she notices a very slight crack. Just a tiny flaw, that ruins an otherwise perfect statuette. The corners of her mouth turn downward, as the frown creeps across her face. She puts the soldier down, and stares at the dust on her finger-tips with disgust. She rubs them across her skirt, leaving a smudge on the

plain material. Her day ruined, she turns to leave the shop, but in the back of her mind, she pictures it. She slowly turns back around, looks down to the bottom shelf, and there it is.

Kneeling, she stares at the figurine. It is a little girl. So strange, this character is not walking with ducks, or carrying a basket, or posing in any special way. It just stares, the head slightly upturned. What could she be staring at, Traci wonders. Traci's eyes get almost as wide as the little girl's, as an image begins to form. She almost grasps it, but it slips away. She jerks, as one does when suddenly awakened from a dream. It is darker in the store now. Traci looks at her watch, and sees that she has been holding the figurine for two hours. She has never seen this Hummel before. She is certain of it. No-one knows this exists. Could it be a forgery? She looks at the bottom of the figure, the Hummel emblem, faded, but complete. There is a sticker that says \$75.00, and even as she walks towards the sales counter, Traci knows how important this little girl is.

The cashier rings up the sale on a dusty register. Behind her, a picture of Sister Hummel holds a place of honor. Traci barely notices; she can't take her eyes off of her little girl. The cashier places it in a used box that is missing half the label. What is left has a picture of a different figurine. She hands the box to Traci, who clutches the box close to her chest, hugging it to her as a mother will hug her infant child.

Traci leaves the store and walks towards home, never looking back, never noticing the store seems to have vanished into the cool, foggy night; never noticing that behind her, Sister Hummel seems to be smiling, as if to say, enjoy.

Later, after she has gotten home, it takes Traci over an hour to choose a place in the curio cabinet for her special little girl. She knows it should go in the center of the top shelf, holding a place of honor. But deciding on what angle she should place it, that's the trick. Once she has set it just so, then comes the challenge of deciding which figurines should be allowed to share the

top shelf with her prize. In the end, she decides none of them should. She loves them all, but this little girl she loves as most women would their own children, and each time she places one of the other figurines next to her, it seems to diminish the little girl, as if it is taking something away from her. It is... wrong. That is the word; it is wrong. And so she winds up rearranging the rest of the shelves to make room for the additions. On the top shelf, the little girl stands alone. It is late, and Traci wants to go to sleep; to dream sweet dreams of pretty little girls with faces turned towards the sun.

The dreams are not sweet. In them, the sun is shining, but everything seems so dark. As if the world is engulfed in shadows. Or perhaps, the night sky has somehow fallen to Earth. All about her, Traci can hear soft mutterings and whispers. Something... someone whispering her name. In the distance, an orange light glows. Laughter comes from either side of her. She walks towards the light, telling herself to stop, and yet, not being able to. The closer she gets to the light, the farther away it seems; impossible. She begins running towards the light, as if she can catch up to it, gaining speed, objects whizzing by her, and yet the light runs away even faster.

The air is knocked out of her as something steps in front of her. She slams against it and falls to the ground, gasping, straining for breath. Somewhere, water is dripping. Traci, finally able to breathe, looks up. About ten feet up in the air, two bright eyes stare back at her. They seem to float in midair. A slow smile appears below the eyes. The white teeth seem very sharp. It is as if some monstrous Cheshire cat has finished off Alice, and has now come for her. The beast speaks, softly at first, and then screaming, "You've... been... BAD!"

Traci hears something swish through the air, and then feels pain, as something stings her calves. Again and again, it beats against her. She tries covering her calves, but the thing doesn't relent. Her dress is torn from her, and she is shoved roughly to the ground. Her nude body

bleeds as bits of rocks and stone cut into her. She screams as her legs are forced apart, and as the beast rapes her, she feels madness closing in.

Traci sits up in bed, awoken by her own screams. The sheets are damp; the smell of urine tells her it isn't just from sweat. She turns on the bedroom light, still disoriented from the dream. She feels as if she has dreamt it before, but can't be certain. She stares at the photographs on the wall of her family. Without being aware of it, she rubs the scars on her legs, tracing their criss-crosses with her finger-tips.

The next morning, the sheets have been washed, the mattress has been aired, and the dream is mostly forgotten. Traci knows she's had a nightmare, and she remembers that it had been particularly bad, but she doesn't remember what it had actually been about.

She decides to treat herself. She will leave work early and go to The Hummel Store. Although she can't afford to buy anything until she gets paid on Friday, she can look around, and if she finds something she likes, she will ask the store keeper to hold it for her until Friday.

When she finally leaves the office, she moves with excitement, knowing that she has indeed found a special place. As she continues walking, she begins to wonder if she has passed the store. She is sure that it had been right here, but there is nothing but a used-goods shop. Through the dirty window, all she can see is junk, nothing of value. And anyway, the sign in the window says this particular store is closed for business. Traci heads up and down the street, frantically searching for the familiar sign, but it simply is not there. It seems as if the store has packed up and left. She goes home, agitated. She has finally found someplace that pleases her, and now, after only one visit, she has lost it.

The rest of the week passes slowly. She goes through the motions—starting work early, finishing up late, going home, eating, and catching a few hours of sleep before returning to work. There have been no more dreams; at least, none that she knows of. She can't remember any, and

is confident that it was a one-time occurrence. However, someone watching over her at night would have noticed Traci twitching occasionally, as a small whimper escapes from her lips.

On Friday, after cashing her check, she begins the trek home. She walks, as she normally does, staring at the ground. She is afraid she might catch someone's attention, and make them think they have an invitation to harass her.

As she walks past one of the windows, she can't help noticing the Hummel in the window. It is the "Merry Wanderer". She looks up and sees shelves crammed with little statues. A grin forms on her face. It is her store. It hasn't shut-down, she simply missed it last time. Before entering, she takes the time to write the address down on a piece of paper she finds in her purse. She will not lose her store again. She enters the store, giggling to herself.

Again she sees the cashier. This time, she stops by, and says, "Hello", the clerk looks up at her and smiles, but doesn't say a word.

Traci looks around, and sees a few Hummels that she has only seen photographs of in magazines. She is tempted to purchase one, but it is more than she can afford to spend. She looks amongst the shelves, and sees a masculine face shoved towards the back of the shelf, stuffed behind several other figurines. She carefully moves them aside, and grasps the porcelain figure, feeling its coolness in her hands. She looks at the little gentleman. He is an attractive man, with dark flowing hair. He is dressed in a tuxedo. An orchestra conductor, his baton is held high in the air; he is obviously in the middle of a passionate crescendo.

Traci cannot believe this. This is the second Hummel she has found in a week that she has never heard of. Both Hummels were found in the same shop. These must be fakes. She sees a Hummel price guide on the next shelf. It is two years old, but it will do. She flips through the pages, trying to see if she can place the Hummel, praying it's there. Please don't be a fake... If

it is a fraud, then that would mean that her little girl was also fake, and she does not think that she could bear that.

Traci stops flipping through the book. Amazed, she stares at a black and white photograph of this little man. “The Maestro”. 1940. She looks carefully, she has to be certain. She is; it’s no fake. But it’s priced in the guide for \$6500. She looks at the little price dangling from the Maestro’s baton. It reads \$68.00. How can this be? Well, if the owner doesn’t mind parting with him for such a low price, Traci certainly doesn’t mind taking advantage.

She takes the figurine up to the cashier, her heart beating as the cashier looks at the merchandise, fearful, that at any moment, she’ll be told there’s a mistake, or maybe even be accused of switching tags! The cashier looks at the Maestro, and merely whispers, “Good choice. He suits you.” The Maestro is wrapped in a brown bag, and handed back to her. Traci takes him, and hurries out the door, before the cashier can change her mind.

As soon as Traci gets home, she tears open the bag, and knows she must make the Maestro hers by placing him in the curio. She clears the second shelf of figurines, crowding the lower shelves even more, and places the Maestro by himself.

She sits down on the couch, staring at her two discoveries, and breathes in and out deeply, as if she is hyperventilating; as if she hasn’t breathed in a very long time. Her breathing gets deeper, more drawn out, and her eyes slowly close. She dozes. Soon, she is asleep. Again, she dreams of creatures in the dark. Again, she is beaten. Again, she is viscously raped. But this time, When the violation is through, and she is left sobbing on the ground, she sees the Maestro. He is conducting a silent orchestra, violently waving his arms, his baton swishing through the air. He keeps saying, “Please... please... please...”. There are other words, that are mouthed silently. What is he saying, she thinks; who is he?

When Traci wakes, her neck is sore from the position she has been sleeping in. Her first thought is that something has happened to her two newest children. She looks at the curio, and air issues through her clenched teeth. The second shelf is empty. The Maestro is missing. No! Not missing; moved. He has been placed on the top shelf. The two figurines face each other. The little girl stares up at the Maestro, eyes wide in fright, as the Maestro holding his baton high up in the air, prepares to strike her with it. He will beat her again, as he did the night before, and the night before that; as he has for months since his wife left him. Traci pulls her skirt up, and looks at the scars that decorate her legs. She knows the Maestro will reek of alcoholic fumes when he tears the clothes off of her; when he steals her childhood from her, when he steals her life. Staring at her legs, she remembers.

Traci cries out as she grabs her price guide off the book shelf. She flips the pages faster and faster, tearing them, creasing them, as she looks at each photograph. There is no little girl. There is no maestro. The pages are filled with Hummels she has seen countless times, but she doesn't see them. In her mind, there is only her and her father. Traci drops the book, her hands shaking. She grabs her purse, looking for tissue as the tears now stream down her face. She comes across an address, slightly smeared, written in a hurry. Traci runs out the door, forgetting her purse, leaving the door unlocked; she must find the store. Nothing else matters, she must find the store.

As Traci approaches the building where she knows the store resides; it is gone, as she knew it would be. She wonders if it was ever there. Had she looked in the broken down shop, she would have seen a newspaper laying on the floor, yellowing with age. She might have seen an article about a robbery that ended with two dead. She might have seen an accompanying photograph of two people. One of the people she would not have recognized. But the other, she might have recognized that face, looking up, smiling, gentle voice saying, "He suits you". Traci

might have seen all of this, but she doesn't look. Instead, she slowly turns around and walks home.

There is a package waiting for her. A small box, with her name written on it. There is no return address, not even a postage stamp, just a smudge of dark mud.

She takes the box in with her, and places it on the table. Looking up, she notices the two figurines are missing from the top shelf. They have disappeared, if they ever really existed. She opens the package. It is the Maestro, kneeling down on the ground. He is holding the little girl, hugging her to him, while crying. The baton lay broken in two pieces on the left side of the base. She places the figurine down, and begins to sob. In the box, is the price guide from the store. She turns the pages until she finds her new Hummel. It is called "Please Forgive Me". She puts the guide down. She knows if she were to get her other guide, the real price guide, she won't find this figurine. Just as she knows that what has been done to her could never be taken away. But neither truth mattered. She thinks that she may not ever forgive him, but maybe she can stop hating him. She thinks that enough of her life has been wasted. As she cries, and looks from the figurine to the rest of her few belongings, she looks at the tank, and thinks that perhaps it is time to buy another fish.