

Ricky's Toys

Donald Heinz stood in his small antique shop and stared out at the warm sun shining down on the town of Ellingsworth. The winter snows were finally gone, and the trees were green with fresh leaves and the promise of a warm summer.

A smile crossed Donald's face, and he basked in the beauty and peace of the town.

Different from Maryland, he thought, rubbing at the stubble on his chin.

Definitely worth it, though. No doubt about it.

Donald walked to the front door, flipped the 'closed' sign over to read 'open,' and then propped the door open. A pleasant breeze carrying the scent of bagels from the coffee shop next door swept into the store, and Donald chuckled as his stomach rumbled. Need to get some food soon, he thought.

He made no attempt to walk out of his shop, though. Instead, he continued enjoying the fine weather and the bright sunlight. As he did so, he saw a large black SUV turn onto Main Street and swing around to back into one of the slanted parking spots in front of the coffee shop. Donald recognized the vehicle immediately. The owner of it, a young woman, had already purchased several items from his shop, and he felt certain she would buy more.

While he stood, watching and hopeful, he saw both the driver's side door and the passenger side door open. The woman stepped out of the vehicle carefully, limping toward the front of the SUV. From the passenger side came a small boy, perhaps no more than ten. He was thin and pale, his white hair bright in the sunlight.

Is he an albino? Donald thought.

The boy turned to the shop, and Donald saw the child's eyes. They were a deep blue, instantly ruling out the albino theory. The woman spoke, and the boy nodded, turning away from his store. Donald watched them both walk into the coffee shop.

She'll be here shortly, he told himself. Donald whistled and walked back to his desk, trying to remember what it was the woman had purchased from him. Books. Definitely some books. Hebrew. Arabic. Gaelic. Really, all over the place with the languages.

Then Donald straightened up. Toys. She bought some of Ricky's toys.

His heart quickened for a moment at the memory of his brother, but Ricky was decades in the past. No need to get sentimental, he thought. I've never been before when it came to him.

Still, Donald's mind walked back through the toys. Several Lego Minifigures, the old spacemen with their faded moon symbols and their broken helmets. She hadn't balked at Donald's price, a sure sign she was a collector.

Well, I was certainly mistaken there, he chuckled. Evidently, she was buying for the boy. Solid money says she will again, too.

Donald went to the shelf where the Lego pieces were stored, selected several prepacked bags and put them on the desk where they'd be easily seen. Then, whistling louder, he strolled over to the bookcases and peered at the various books in foreign languages. He found several in Dutch, one in Sanskrit, and a third in what he assumed was either Greek or Russian.

Where did I even get these? he asked, chuckling and shaking his head. I really don't know how I've come to own half this stuff.

Donald carried the books to the desk, placed them beside the toys, and nodded happily. Now, I relax, wait for them to come in, and then make my sale. No pressure, though. Nothing over the top. Smooth and easy. She'll probably buy them all.

A single good sale meant he didn't have to worry about covering the bills for the day. Donald had everything worked out perfectly. A hundred dollars for the week and Donald was in great shape.

"Good morning," a voice said.

Donald looked up and was surprised to see the boy standing there.

"Good morning to you," Donald replied pleasantly. "Is your mom coming in as well?"

"My mom?" the boy asked, confused. Then he smiled. "Oh, you mean Joyce. No. She's getting some food, then she'll meet me in the car."

Donald felt his hope for a good sale sinking, but he kept the smile on his face. "Very nice."

"Oh, hey," the boy said, stepping further into the shop. "Are those more Lego bricks?"

"They are," Donald confirmed.

"And books, too!" The excitement in the boy's voice was unmistakable.

Here's hoping Joyce sent him in with some money, Donald thought, or that he can at least go out and get some.

The boy fairly trotted down the center aisle to the desk, and Donald stepped back in order to allow him an unhindered view of the items. Donald watched as the boy picked up the first book, his eyes darting back and forth over the letters. Then, the child flipped page after page, his blue eyes wide and moving impossibly fast. In a moment, the boy put the book down and picked up the second, repeating the process. Finally, he did the same with the third. When he finished, he grinned at Donald.

"How much for these three books?" the child asked. "Thirty dollars," Donald answered easily.

"Cool." The boy took a roll of money out of his front pocket and counted out three tens, laying them on the counter where they curled up slightly. Then, the boy turned his attention to the toys. Carefully, as if he was handling breakable china, the boy turned them over in his hands, peering intently at the various pieces. Looking up at Donald, he asked, "Are these all the Lego bricks you have?"

Donald thought about it, then he shook his head.

"No," Donald admitted. "I think I have another box under a table in the back. Do you want to look at them, too?"

"Yes, please," the boy said, smiling. "I want to buy these here, and if I have enough money left over, I want to buy some more."

I saw your money roll, son, Donald thought with a grin. You have plenty of money.

"I think it's an excellent idea." Donald smiled. "Now, if you would like to wait, I'll just duck in the back and return in a minute."

“Cool,” the boy said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and smiling broadly.

Donald chuckled and left the desk. He went into his small backroom and dug around, looking for the ancient, battered suitcase Ricky had always carried his Legos in.

Why didn't he ever call them 'Legos' like everyone else? Donald thought, his smile fading. He was always so annoying. Especially when it came to his Lego bricks. Well, no need to think about him. Maybe this boy will buy the rest of Ricky's toys, and I won't have to think about him anymore.

Donald sighed, located the suitcase, and pulled it out. He struggled with the brass catches for a moment, then they popped open loudly. Lifting the top, Donald smiled down at the scattered bricks and pieces. I could easily get this boy to pay another fifty for this. Maybe I will, too.

Donald took a deep breath and cleared his mind. He needed to be able to see the subtle body language of a customer. Satisfied with his state of mind, Donald closed the suitcase, locked it, and carried it out to the desk.

The boy smiled at him, and Donald grinned.

Did it get darker out? Donald wondered, turning on the desk lamp as he put the suitcase up. He kept his attention focused on the boy, not wanting to look out of the windows to check the status of the weather.

“I've had these around for a while,” Donald declared confidentially. He opened the suitcase and added, “I haven't quite found the right person to sell them to. The Lego bricks, well, they're special.”

“I know,” the boy said, nodding solemnly.

He even has the same expression Ricky would get when playing with his toys or explaining what he had built and why, Donald thought with disgust. But he continued smiling. He stood by silently while the boy reached in and picked up individual pieces. The child would nod to himself, seem to whisper as he turned the brick around in his hand and then pick up another.

The Lego whisperer, Donald thought and had to fake a sneeze to prevent himself from laughing.

The boy didn't seem to notice.

Several minutes passed by, and if Donald hadn't been certain the boy was going to buy more than the books, he would have removed the suitcase. As it was, nothing about the boy's actions indicated he was trying to play with the pieces. It was as though he was legitimately seeking out the history of each Lego by touching it.

Finally, the boy nodded and said, “I'll take them all, Donald.”

“Fantastic,” Donald started. Then he stopped and looked at the boy. “Did Joyce tell you my name?”

The boy shook his head, a grim expression on his features. It was then that Donald saw the scars on the boy's forehead, the crooked bend of his nose and the chips in his teeth. There was nothing childlike about the child. He was physically young, but there was an age to his blue eyes, and a darkness lurking about the corners of his mouth.

“How do you know my name, then?” Donald asked. He felt uncomfortable as the boy stared at him.

The child loaded the bags of Lego pieces into the suitcase, then he did the same with the books. Silently, he closed and locked the suitcase, setting it down on the floor. Then, from his pocket, the boy extracted another seventy dollars, counting the money out for Donald's benefit.

“How do you know my name!” Donald snapped. Fear and anger spiked within him. The boy was disturbing.

“You want to know how I know your name, Donald?” the boy whispered. Before Donald could respond, the child reached into a pocket and pulled out one of the Lego spacemen Donald had sold to Joyce. One of Ricky’s spacemen.

“What?” Donald demanded. “Did the spaceman tell you my name?” The boy shook his head. “Ricky did.”

Donald’s breath caught in his throat, and he trembled. He dry-swallowed several times before he managed to croak out, “What did you just say?”

“Your brother Ricky,” the boy continued. “He told me your name.”

“Get out,” Donald hissed. “I don’t know where you got your information from, but I don’t have a brother named Ricky. Take your stuff and go.”

“You had a brother named Ricky.” The child glared at Donald. “He loved his Lego spacemen. He loved his toys. But Ricky, Ricky didn’t love you. He didn’t even like you. Ricky didn’t like your Dad, and he didn’t like your Mom. Didn’t like your sisters or your other brother, Martin. Ricky did like his Lego spacemen. And your grandfather, he loved to buy all of your presents, and he loved the way Ricky built. All the time, your grandfather told Ricky he would be a great engineer. You didn’t like that, Donald.”

Donald trembled where he stood. Goosebumps stood out all over his body, and there was a dry, unpleasant sensation in the back of his throat. His head throbbed with a headache that worsened by the second.

“Get out,” Donald whispered. “Leave me alone.”

“Ricky doesn’t want me to leave you alone,” the boy said. “Who are you!” Donald yelled.

The child grinned. “My name is Alex. I’m here to punish you.”

Donald reached for his cordless phone, picked it up, and stopped. The battery was torn out of it. Furious, he snatched his cellphone from the desk only to find the battery was dead. When he angrily looked up at Alex, Donald saw the blinds were drawn on the windows, and the front door was closed. The open sign had been flipped around.

Donald was separated from the rest of the town. He shook his head and looked at the boy. “Listen to me.” Donald’s voice quivered as he spoke. “I am going to physically pick you up and throw you out of my store.”

Alex tilted his head to the left, nodded, then grinned. “Ricky said that sounds like you. Picking on little kids. You used to pick on him all the time.

Constantly. Your dad would tell him to grow a pair and punch you back. Your mom, she said he needed to stop being a little baby. Even when you broke his arm.”

Donald stepped back, his throat closing while shudders tore through him. Gathering his courage and self-respect, Donald stalked around the desk and reached for the boy.

“No,” Alex spat, and Donald was thrown backward.

Donald struck the empty, black walnut case of a grandfather clock. While the piece shook on its base, Donald fell to the floor, catching himself with his hands and knees, crying out as sharp pains exploded in his knees and the heels of his hands.

"You can't do anything to me," Alex said. He sat down on the floor, cross-legged. The blood rushed in Donald's ears, and he was afraid to look at the boy but drawn to stare at him.

"Do you remember?" Alex asked. "Remember what?" Donald demanded.

"What Ricky looked like?" Alex waited for an answer, and when Donald didn't give one, the boy barked, "Speak!"

Donald cringed and whispered, "No."

"No." Alex chuckled. Then, as if to someone else, Alex added, "I know you told me he would say that. Of course, he's your brother."

Donald looked up, eyes darting around. "You're not telling me my brother's here?"

"He is." Alex eyed Donald with disgust. "Lies," Donald whispered. "Nothing but lies."

"Sure." Alex smiled at Donald, and there was a bitter brutality to it that sank claws of fear deep into Donald's stomach. The boy glanced over to the left and nodded. "Yeah. I think I can do it. I mean, I haven't tried before, but it should be easy enough."

"What?" Donald asked.

Alex ignored him. Instead, the strange, malignant child focused on the wall beyond Donald, and a moment later, the room became almost unbearably frigid. A shape took form beside Alex, and Donald saw it was another child. As the form became defined, Donald shrieked.

Ricky stood to the left of Alex. Donald's brother wore a white t-shirt and jeans, tennis shoes, and his old Army watch. On Ricky's right temple was a small red lump, the only mark the Louisville Slugger wooden baseball bat had left on his brother's head.

The sight of his brother and the incriminating mark dragged Donald screaming into memories. Ricky on the baseline at the ballfield near the stadium. Donald heard Ricky complaining, saying he didn't want to play baseball. He didn't like it. All he wanted to do was go home and play with his Lego bricks. Maybe read a book.

Donald remembered making fun of him, their brother Martin doing the same.

What did he do then, when we were picking on him? Donald asked himself. Don't lie to yourself. You remember. We started to push him. Back and forth. Back and forth until he finally decided to run. Like he always did. He was going to go home and hide with his toys.

We didn't want him to.

I didn't want him to, Donald thought. He remembered the feel of the bat in his hands, the way the smooth wood touched his palms, the sensation of twisting the handle. Ricky turning his head to yell at Martin, and the swing.

The bat always sounded beautiful when it cut through the air, especially when Donald had a good swing. There was a crack as the tip of the bat connected with Ricky's temple. It wasn't the same sound of leather and wood colliding for a solid base hit.

Instead, it sounded exactly like a piece of wood smashing into a watermelon. The crack was disturbing, dragging both Donald and Martin fully into the moment. Together, they watched Ricky collapse to the ground, as if someone had turned the switch off on a child's toy.

"Donnie," Ricky whispered, and the sound of his childhood nickname shook Donald more than anything else about the situation.

"Go away, you're dead," Donald moaned.

"Yeah," Ricky said, nodding. "I know. I don't like it. You know, Mom locked all my toys away. She didn't want to sell them. Kind of felt bad afterward. Did you know that?"

Donald shook his head.

"Huh, funny," Ricky grinned. "Thought you would have figured it out. Dad decided you and Martin killed me by accident. Didn't say anything about it to you, though. Wish he had."

Donald shuddered at the thought. Their father's hands had been large, and punishment received from them was always painful.

"You and Martin, you were always his favorites, though," Ricky continued. His grin faded, leaving a scowl behind. "Now, when I've been dead for so long, you decide you want to sell my toys. My toys, Donnie. Why not your own?"

Donald cleared his throat. "I'm saving them. They're worth quite a bit. I want to, well, make sure I have them for a rainy day."

"Huh," Ricky muttered. He glanced at Alex. "Can I?"

"Sure," Alex nodded. "I'm okay with it. I can do it for you, too, if you change your mind."

Ricky gave Alex a thankful smile.

"Do what?" Donald asked, glancing from the living boy to the dead one. "Do what!"

"Kill you," Alex said.

Ricky glanced around, frowned, and asked, "Do you have a bat in here?" "What!" Donald shrieked. "Why?"

"You killed me when you hit my head," Ricky said over his shoulder as he vanished amongst the shelves. "I want to kill you the same way. Fair is fair, right?"

Donald got shakily to his feet. "No." "Sit down," Alex said.

"No," Donald stated emphatically. "I will not! You can't make me stay here."

"I can!" Alex snarled, and Donald flew back again as a rush of power erupted from the boy. "I can do whatever I want, and what I want right now is for you to get what you deserve."

"Hey, Alex!" Ricky called from the back. "I found something!"

Donald's head thumped loudly, his vision blurred, and pain blossomed in his back.

I need to leave, he thought, his mind hazy. He leaned against the wall and used it for support as he struggled to walk. Behind him, Donald heard his dead brother talking to Alex, but Donald couldn't understand what was being said. His brain wouldn't comprehend the words. I think I'm really hurt.

He paused as a wave of darkness swept over his eyes. When it passed, he walked drunkenly toward the back door. Outside. Get outside. Get help.

His thoughts were disjointed, and, again, blackness smothered him. Donald's vision cleared, and he realized, a split second too late, that he was falling. He barely had time to throw his hands up to help cushion his collapse. For an indeterminate amount of time, Donald lay on the floor, staring off to the right.

"Hey," Ricky said, crouching down. "How you doin'?" "You're dead," Donald replied, his words slurred.

Ricky grinned. "Yup. You killed me."

"Accident." Donald licked his lips, tried to say more but failed.

"Maybe," Ricky agreed. "Doesn't matter. You still need to be punished.

Eye for an eye. All that stuff. It's only fair."

"No," Donald muttered. "No. Not fair. You deserved it."

Alex's voice came from behind him, but Donald didn't know what was said. His dead brother nodded at whatever it was.

"Alex is right," Ricky stated, his voice cold. "I didn't deserve anything.

Never did."

The dead boy's hands moved, and Donald saw Ricky held something vaguely familiar. It took his brain a moment to recognize it and come up with a name.

"Bowling pin," Donald murmured.

"Yeah," Ricky nodded. He held it up for Donald to see. It was a long, thin-necked pin made of dark wood. Most of the white paint was gone from it, leaving only streaks behind. "It's hard to hold this, just so you know. I have to concentrate. Did you know Alex taught me how?"

Donald tried to shake his head, but it hurt too much. He settled for a whispered, "No."

"Yeah," Ricky smiled. "He told me to use his anger. His friend Timmy taught him that. You wouldn't like Timmy. He's a bad man. A bad man who likes being bad. I guess that's the worst, huh?"

"Sure," Donald whispered. "I need to go home. I don't feel good."

A second pair of shoes appeared, and then the boy Alex squatted beside Ricky. Alex squinted, nodded, and then grinned. "You look bad," Alex stated. "Really bad. I think you broke something in your back when you hit the wall the second time. You might have a concussion, too."

"It's time for me to go," Donald sighed, closing his eyes.

He screamed a second later as something pinched his eyelid and pulled it back. The pain was intense, driving some of the haze from his thoughts. The skin stretched a little further before it snapped into place. He covered the injured eye with his hand and opened his other eye, horrified, trying to see who had hurt him.

Alex glared at him. "You don't get to sleep. Not yet. Not until it's forever."

Donald's eye darted from Alex to Ricky. Their expressions were nearly identical in their disgust and hatred. With a tremendous amount of effort, Donald looked away from them and focused on the door to the back room, where there was a smaller exit. He reached out with both hands and pulled himself a few inches toward the room.

Both boys stood up, and the living one stepped off to one side. Alex's voice was clear and proud when he spoke.

"Do you remember everywhere he ever hit you?" Alex asked. "Yes," Ricky answered, his voice seething with rage.

Hands grasped Donald's arm, and he yelled as he was flipped onto his back. Alex stood on one side and Ricky on the other. It was then that Donald focused fully upon the antique bowling pin. His dead brother gripped it tightly, and Donald knew what was going to happen.

"Don't," Donald begged, hating the high-pitched fear infecting the word. "Leave me alone!"

There was no smile on Ricky's face. No grim grin of satisfaction. Instead, the dead boy wore a serious expression, one of intense focus.

"Do you remember," Ricky whispered, "how much you liked to give me a Charley horse, Donnie?"

"That was Martin," Donald denied. "Not me."

"No." Ricky shook his head. "Martin liked to give me Indian-burns on my wrists. You, you loved Charley horses. You'd walk up and yell, 'Who won the race? Charley's Horse!'"

"Not me," Donald repeated.

Ricky slammed the bowling pin into Donald's right thigh with terrible force. Donald screamed as he felt the femur break. He clutched at his leg as Ricky asked, "And do you remember that time I was on my bike? You know, the one that used to be yours? Even though you had a new one, you were angry I got your old one? So, I rode by, and you hit my knee with the handle of the rake? Do you remember that?"

Donald did. He remembered it clearly, but he shook his head violently from side to side.

"Liar," Ricky whispered, and he smashed the bowling pin into Donald's left knee. Like the femur on the right, the knee broke, collapsing beneath the force of the blow. Donald's voice became raw from the screaming. He writhed and rolled across the floor, pain blinding him, his agony deafening him. Donald didn't know how long he was ignorant of the world, but when he could think clearly again, his brother was still there.

"Alex went to get something to eat," Ricky confided. "But he'll be back soon. When he does, it'll be time for me to go, Donnie. Does that make you sad?"

"No," Donnie hissed through clenched teeth. "I hate you."

"There's my big brother," Ricky nodded. "I remember that Donnie. He's the one who made my life hell. That Donnie is the one who killed me. Killed me on purpose."

"Where are you going to go now?" Donnie growled through clenched teeth. "Huh? You going to hang out with that boy, a dead boy stuck playing with his toys forever?"

"Yeah," Ricky said, chuckling. "I guess so. It's good, though. There are lots of other ghosts where Alex lives. He's the king of them all. He goes out and looks for ghosts. Brings them home. If something bad

happens, he makes sure the bad people get punished. Or, if he can, he lets the ghosts hurt the bad people.”

Ricky leaned forward, hatred dancing in his eyes. “Do you remember what you gave me for my sixth birthday, Donnie?”

“I didn’t give you anything,” Donald snarled.

“Sure, you did,” Ricky disagreed. “You broke my nose and gave me two black eyes.”

Before Donald could argue, the bowling pin crashed into his nose, flattening it across his face. He felt both orbital sockets break as well.

“You knocked out two teeth on my seventh birthday.” Ricky’s voice was barely audible above Donald’s pain. A second later the pin shattered Donald’s front teeth, driving shards of enamel into his tongue and gums.

The bell on the front door rang, and for a split second, hope blossomed in Donald’s mind. Hope that crashed and burned as he heard Alex say, “It’s time, Ricky.”

“Well,” Ricky sighed, “I’m happy I got to see you. Now, I’m happy to say goodbye.”

Ricky lifted the bowling pin over his head with both hands. The dead boy’s smile was one of pure malignancy. Terror raced through Donald as he tried to lift his hands to block the killing blow, but he was too slow.

The bowling pin, it seemed, was just as effective as a Louisville Slugger.