

# A Sense of Duty

by Bob Stein

Bob was wandering the mall, window-shopping in lieu of lunch. Normally he hated shopping malls, but this one had a great book store and a Spencer's Gifts, so he came fairly often. Which is why he was surprised to see Spells 'R' Us.

The store didn't look new. Funny thing was, he remembered a shallow display case being here last week. Once he got a look at the window displays, he was even more puzzled. Fantasy carvings, elaborate masks, and ancient books covered the shelves. How could he have not seen this place before?

He entered through the old-fashioned wooden door, and smiled at the tinkle of a silver bell above his head. So old-fashioned. He liked that. Though he had grown up in the computer age, he often longed for the imagined simplicity and pleasures of rural life in the past.

No one was visible in the store, so he clasped his hands behind his back and looked over the cases. The store's wares looked old and very expensive. One large framed antique photograph caught his eye. It showed a huge draft horse in front of a barn, reins held by a freckle-faced little kid wearing a straw hat and baggy shorts. There was a plaque under the yellowed image that he had to squint to read. 'SEIL'S KENNY FARCEUR - NATIONAL CHAMPION 1930.' He loved the scene, but didn't have a place to hang the thing even if he could afford it.

There was other stuff from the Second World War. Pictures, medals, some uniform parts. That was another love of his. Old fighting aircraft. He had just about every WWII movie made, and loved to run the dogfight scenes over and over.

Some of the costume pieces were wonderful, obviously professional quality. A satyr costume displayed on a stand looked absolutely real - including the genitalia. That surprised him. He couldn't imagine wearing such a thing in public. The perfection was marred only by a torn zipper.

He looked at his watch and sighed. Just as well no one was here. He probably couldn't afford much, and it was almost time to go back to work. He turned to leave.

And almost walked into an old man standing behind him. Stumbling back, he grinned apologetically. "Sorry! I didn't see you! Doesn't seem to be anyone here right now. Guess they are out to lunch."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Bob." The old man smiled and moved around behind the counter. "I was watching, in case you needed anything special."

Bob scratched his head. How did the man know his name? Maybe he'd seen 'Robert' on his pocket ID badge, though the lettering was awfully small. Shrugging, he shook his head. "Didn't see anything that I really couldn't live without. Nice shop, though. Maybe I can check it out better some other time."

The old man spoke as he headed for the door. "You won't find me again if you leave. Can you spare just a moment to see some of my displays in the back? I'm sure there is something there you would find interesting."

Bob paused. Well, the guy had an unusual line. "I have a few minutes left. Fair warning, though. I don't have much cash."

The old man waved his hand as he led Bob through the curtained-off entrance. "Don't worry about that. There's always a way to work something out."

The back of the shop was much larger than he would have ever guessed. Almost a warehouse, with elaborate displays of costumes and dioramas. One depicted werewolves of all ages and types crowding around the bloody carcass of a stag. The next showed buxom cheerleaders frozen in mid-leap as they cheered an unseen team. Three other exhibits also featured glamorous babes, some in a fashion show, some at a beach, and a group dressed up for a prom.

The old man led him past all of those, and stopped in front of a darkened display in the back corner. "Don't get to use this one much these days." He flicked a switch, and Bob's mouth fell open as the scene lit up.

It was the old picture from the front of the shop, only done in a color diorama. The massive horse was golden brown and white, and the kid had red hair and dirt-streaked skin. The barn was weathered gray, with streaks of old green paint. He could almost smell the hay and animal scents.

"That's incredible!" Bob marveled at the details. There were flies on the horse's back, and the boy's teeth were scummy. Certainly not the sanitized perfection most scenes like this showed. And much more real.

The old man smiled and removed the plastic chain which barred closer inspection. "Go ahead, take a look. Try on one of the costumes."

Bob frowned in puzzlement. "Costumes? I don't see any."

Reaching under the horse's neck, the old man pulled down a hidden zipper to reveal a cavity inside. "You can climb in here, or try on the boy's clothes." He gestured towards the barn. "Got a cow and a bull in there, and a mare to go with the stallion here."

Bob didn't quite follow what the old man was saying, his attention still focused on the wonderful rural scene. Grinning, he picked up the boy's straw hat and plopped it on his own head.

"Huh?" Startled, he realized that he seemed to be a lot smaller. Looking down didn't help. His shirt and pants were far too large, almost falling off him.

"Here." The old man handed him the baggy shorts. As Bob reached for them, his clothes vanished completely, leaving him naked. Dazed, he stumbled back against the horse's leg, and jumped when the animal snorted and moved a bit. The scene had expanded greatly, showing pasture and other horses beyond the barn, and a house and fields in front of him. Only a small tunnel-like opening showed the shop as he remembered it.

Looking around and then down at his obviously prepubescent body, Bob blinked and shook his head in disbelief. It had to be some incredible illusion. Three-dimensional holograms, maybe? The tunnel was getting smaller, and everything around him got even more real. He could hear the flies buzzing now, and caught the stink of his own unwashed body. He frowned. This was too complete. No hologram could give you the sensations of dirty teeth or longer hair. There was a rush of fear as he saw the old man wave, and then vanish along with all traces of the tunnel.

"Lucas!" A woman's shout drew his attention to the house. "Get away from that horse, child! He's liable to step on you and smush ya' flat!"

He scrambled away from the huge animal, and then froze as he realized he was a naked, filthy 4 or 5 year-old. But why was that wrong? He was suddenly confused, and absently sucked his thumb. Lucas Carver, 4 years old, dropped his hand-me-down shorts in the dust and wandered over to watch Pa tinker with the Model T. His attention was quickly caught by the buzz of an engine overhead. Excited, he ran out to the center of the yard to see one of an airplane passing overhead.

The old man looked at the old picture. It showed a huge draft horse standing by itself in front of a barn, with a naked little boy staring up at the sky. He smiled sadly and picked up one of the framed World War II medals to read the inscription underneath. 'MEDAL OF VALOR - PRESENTED POSTHUMOUSLY TO LIEUTENANT LUCAS CARVER, PILOT, USN - MAY 3, 1945.'

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