

The Best Kind of Childhood Playmate

by Judy Ashley

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John proved to be my perfect playmate. He lived next door on our busy street near downtown Lansing in a very large house with three stairways. John celebrated his 80th birthday

when I was five. He devoted his full attention to my way of doing things,

spending hours with me each week, never in a hurry to get away. He shared fascinating treasures. I could get dirty without worrying about my mother's rules of cleanliness. He let me talk and talk and he listened, but he answered all my questions.

In our neighborhood, the houses were very close together. From our dining room window, I could see into John's dining room and if he were walking around, I knew it was time.

"Mother, I can see John. He is walking around. Can I go visit him now? Can I?" I begged.

"Yes, you may go visit him. It will help him not be so lonely," my mother said.

Later after four hours next door, I heard my mother say on the phone, "I did not mean she had to be there all day!" If John suffered from my visits in any way, I never knew it.

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Every day, John dressed in a black, pin-striped, three-piece suit, white shirt, and a dark-colored tie, with a gold watch fastened to a chain in his vest. On special occasions he let me touch the sparkling gems he wore in the cuffs of his shirt. He wore glasses, but often only when he read.

"John, you have no hair on top of your head, but only on the sides, why do you cut it that way?" I asked.

In a very soft-spoken voice, he replied, "I am not sure. That is a very good question."

Often, we walked in his backyard and he held my hand. I noticed he had very chubby fingers, contrasted with my father's thin ones. It never occurred to me to ask John what work he did when he was young like my father. I only knew he must be very smart because he taught me how to play Chinese checkers and Canasta. Later, when I discovered his pharmacist background, I figured that must have been easy compared to teaching me these games.

Any time we planned to challenge each other, John pulled up a special game table in the den; I sat in the puffy, pink-flowered chair, he in a straight-backed chair. Although I admired his ability to teach me these games, he lacked any ability to win. He often complimented me about my cleverness, and delegated responsibility to me as a result. He allowed me to put the Chinese checker marble set under the huge dresser in the main bedroom. Occasionally he delegated me to shuffle the cards and put them in neat piles and return them to the third drawer in his desk, requiring the use of a brass key to unlock the drawer.

John also taught me about intrigue, as we often went to the upstairs closet to search for secret drawers. He showed me the machine in the basement which pressed sheets and towels and made them easy to fold. His house had a special room in the basement, too, only for making wine or canning fruits and vegetables, and included a strange two-burner stove.

John clearly was rich, because my parents frequently visited friends at their houses, and John's house was the only one decorated with dark, thick, emerald-green carpeting. Additional evidence of his wealth included the bookcases in the parlor with metal grill doors, and when you closed them, the latch made a loud, clicking, rich sound.

A favorite activity John taught me involved climbing the hall steps to the first landing, sitting down, scooting to the edge, and plopping down each step to the bottom. We laughed and squealed each time for at least an hour. He patiently watched from the bottom of the steps.

My most important lesson from John, however, occurred on a day when I changed the rules of our Canasta game. I wanted to win that day, and if I changed one of our rules, I would win.

"John, did you know we only need one card of a suit to pick up the discard pile?"

"Well, well...let me think about this...hmmm, I seem to remember that," he whispered.

I jumped up and down for several minutes while picking up the stack of winning cards, giggled, and teased him about his loss. While walking home later, I felt guilty and realized somehow by changing the rules in the middle of the game, I had cheated John. So the next day, I announced the old rules again. It felt fair when winning then. It took me years to understand John's tactics in letting me win. He really was smart.

When I was seven, my family moved across town to a new neighborhood. John lived a few more years, and we visited him regularly until he moved into a nursing home. I missed him, but after entering school, new friends entered my life. Whenever people told tales about childhood friends, John became my best story, and, even though he was 80, he defined the best kind of playmate.