

The Jewelry Box

By

R Alan Burgess

In small towns like this one, everybody knows everyone else. They know who they are, and they know what they have. Good if you need a cup of sugar, but bad if you're the only one that ever has any sugar. And everybody wants sugar, of course. You see, isolation creates envy, and envy can permeate into the simplest distillations of haves and have-nots. Everyone knows what you have, because everyone is always watching. And people watch what they want, and want what they watch. Their mind's eye fixed on the prize, even in slumber. They pretend they have it, they see themselves with it. More importantly, they see themselves *taking* it. Benny Liebowitz? No, all he had was a mountain of debt and chronic bronchitis. Jennifer Smalls? She passed the shop everyday...there she goes now, but not interested. Rebekah Robertson...ah, yes.

Beautiful family. She saw Rebekah coming and watched her, before even Rebekah knew where she was going.

What a quaint little shop, Rebekah thought. She had passed it a thousand times and only now, for some reason, felt an urge to go in and peruse. Maybe the comments her husband made, sometimes in jest but always there, had something to do with it – not adventurous enough? Rebekah couldn't argue, but she had wanted to. She filled up their whole lives creating a Home Living magazine until they were indistinguishable from the touted perfection of small-town USA, only to be reminded by her husband's constant banter that the pages within their magazine were blank; but the cover was perfect. Maybe this is the shop – *yes, this one* – that would turn those blank pages into the beginnings of an adventure.

BLING DING da-ding ding...the bells subsided moments after Rebekah entered and began taking in the shop's...eccentricities. That's what it was – not weird, but eccentric. The doorbells hung over the threshold like shriveled mistletoe, authentic and charming. The bells echoed through the shop, the oak floorboards scooping up the sound and smearing it in every crevice of the cluttered room. Rebekah was glad she wore her soft-soled flats and reveled in the unintended consequence of being able to stealthily navigate the maze of shelves, avoiding danger, always cautiously keeping in mind the possibility of the Minotaur at the center of life's many mazes. Caution had a lot to do with it. If you didn't take any risks, you couldn't lose. She took a few steps in and absorbed the pleasant smells of cedar and lilac, wafts of pages of books older than she was, and alternating waves of varying incense. *See?* She could be adventurous.

Rebekah squinted and strained, craning her neck to see through the labyrinthine shelving. She thought she made out the shopkeeper's silhouette behind a counter, watching. Who, given the endless knick-knacks and weird – *no, eccentric* – odds and ends, she could only assume to be

a short, curious old man with coke bottle glasses and a fedora, decorated in charms and countless tales from faraway lands. A gift from here would prove to Mitch she could find *something* adventurous. She would show him.

“Hello?” Rebekah called out, half-hoping for a “*we’re closed!*” Adventure over.

BLING DING da-ding ding da-ding...an extra beat. She turned to see a mail man setting a box inside the doorway. Their eyes met and they exchanged obligatory head nods. She’d seen him around, everybody was around; he was the same mailman on their street. He stood and shook the snow from his scarf and wrinkled his mustache, “Creepy little shop, ain’t it? Have a good one!” Rebekah smiled and watched him on his way.

“Come in, child.” Rebekah wheeled around and let out a startled gasp that had been brewing since she walked in. Before her, very close, wasn’t an old man or dusty fedora, but a fair skinned and upright woman, about her height. She stood politely with her hands clasped and a doting smile balanced on her lips.

“I’m so sorry,” Rebekah managed, “I didn’t see you there!”

“I didn’t mean to startle you, dear. Come in, we’ve many things they’ll like,” she said. Rebekah took her in, her voice was soothing but dampened, quiet. The woman had interlaced necklaces hanging to her waistline, and a silky black lace dress revealing only her ankles. It was made up tight at the neck with a beautiful black crow broach, a shiny black pearl in its eye. Rebekah thought she saw it twinkle for a moment.

“I – I’m looking for a gift, for my kids. They –” *did she say they, or did I?* – “they like...well, I’m looking for something unique. It’s a surprise for them,” said Rebekah, unsure why she was nervous. She supposed all adventurers were nervous. *I need something to show my husband I’m not boring...* but that wouldn’t have come out right, she thought. The woman turned

and beckoned, her smile remained balanced on her face. Her hair was long and graying, not quite matching the fairness and aged beauty her face and features presented. It hung in a loose ponytail down to the small of her back, tied with an odd bundle of what Rebekah thought looked like a snippet of twigs with tiny red berries, like holly or something. *At least I'm in the right place.* Rebekah followed her in.

As they walked, the muffled thud of each heel on the woman's black leather boots rang against the oak floor until overcome by the next one. Each rhythmic step was like the ticking of a clock, keeping time all the way through the shop. Rebekah's flats made no sound at all, and she may have pondered a little more on exactly how she hadn't heard the woman approach her from behind earlier were it not for the attention demanded by the shop's collection. They passed shelf after shelf, all uneven and thrown together absent of rhyme or reason, filled with all sorts of random objects. A bowl filled with peacock feathers was surrounded by a pile of dusty books upon which sat a medieval goblet. There were tall, standalone objects – a grandfather clock, an expertly carved barstool, a globe bar with crystal decanters filled with crimson and amber liquids. She saw many lamps, potted plants, and mirrors hanging on the walls. Chandeliers and decorative pieces hung from the ceiling, touched by light smoke emitted from the many burning candles and incense sticks. Some items had eyes; a baby doll looked at her and a stuffed raccoon stared into the dark. Rebekah noticed amongst the objects and shelving were pictures, some loose and some framed. Pictures of people, black and white, many browned and sepia toned, were dispersed throughout nearly the entire shop. *Definitely the right place for an adventure.*

“Little girls, you said? I've just the thing,” the woman raised her right hand as they stepped through the shop and snapped her fingers once producing a loud POP, and jolted Rebekah's attention from the ocean of curiosities surrounding her.

“Yes, that’s right,” Rebekah didn’t remember mentioning she had only girls, or that they were little, “my girls. Ten and seven.” The woman’s back was still turned as she weaved through the cluttered shop, Rebekah followed, more engaged now after the loud – louder than it should have been – snap to attention. Suddenly the woman stopped and Rebekah almost ran into the back of her. She wasn’t moving, and Rebekah grew uneasy. She decided to try and break the tension, “You’ve a lovely collection here, ma’am. Who...who are the people in all of these pictures, if you don’t mind me asking? Some appear quite old.”

BLING DING da-ding... “One more!” shouted the mail man as he placed one more package on the pile by the door, now across the shop a world away. The doorbell made Rebekah jump, and she turned in its direction, but could only hear the mailman’s voice through the forest of shelving with its many interesting leaves. She heard the door close and they were alone again, the cold wind from the brief entry barely reached her. She turned back to the shopkeeper, wondering for a second if following the mailman back to the world would have been the right move. She could head to Target and get a nice safe throw blanket for her girls, and call it a day. *One adventure down, check please.*

The object, thrust in her face by the woman in black, having picked it up and turned around hoisting it inches from Rebekah without the slightest sound, was a box. It took up Rebekah’s entire frame of vision and she had to step back, but still couldn’t see the woman’s head around the box held in her face. Behind it, the woman whispered, “I like to try and keep pictures of those who’ve...donated...to my shop. Keeps their memories...alive.”

Rebekah focused on the box. “It’s...a jewelry box?” she asked.

“That’s right. For your girls.”

It was beautiful, but obviously very old. It was made of wood, hand carved, and appeared to Rebekah to be somewhat heavy. She was surprised the woman was still holding it upright in front of her.

“Take it child, this is the one,” the woman said. Rebekah stepped back, and reached out for the box. She took it cautiously and found it not so heavy after all. Holding it in her hands she lowered it to examine it, revealing the woman’s face which maintained the same curved smile perched on her lips.

The jewelry box was clearly old, but not beat up or worn. The carvings were intricate, of horses and forests, a mountain scene with a lake, fields of flowers and little carved out specs for butterflies and birds. There was no paint, but the artisan carvings were deep and contrasted to give the box life all the same. “It’s lovely,” Rebekah said, entranced by the box’s craftsmanship. She set it down on a small end table near them and opened the top by releasing a small latch in the front of the box. The lid was hinged to unfold upright, revealing another small latch which held the wings of the box closed. Rebekah lifted it and opened the wardrobe style arms of the box where necklaces and bracelets could be hung. A small row of tiny little drawers down the middle were storage for rings and earrings. Poking from one of the drawers was the corner of a polaroid, Rebekah pulled it out. It was a black and white photo of a child wearing a dress and sitting on a rocking horse.

“The previous owner, perhaps?” Rebekah asked.

“Oh no child, this jewelry box is yours now. I’ll take that,” the woman snatched the picture from Rebekah violently, her smile fading ever so slightly and then immediately restored with the picture in her hand. Rebekah thought to herself that her little adventure was coming to a close, and home, anywhere really, would be less eccentric – *no, less weird* – than this little shop.

“Thank you, I’ll take it,” Rebekah said.

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Cooper barreled through the front screen door as the children piled out of the van and into the mounds of playful snow hugging their home. The girls giggled as the retriever, golden as the sun, buried his head in the snow and lifted up with bits still stuck to his nose, and then shook the dusting off with his ears flopping wildly. Rebekah watched from the porch, taking in their childhood and playful levity with a warm smile. Mitch stood by the parked van sipping his coffee, he raised a silent toast to his wife as they watched their entire world happily frolic in the snowy, suburban paradise they built for themselves.

Boots kicked and scarves hung, Rebekah’s family settled into the heat of the home as the cold melted off. Behind her, she hid from view the very exciting and non-boring present she found today in town. She held an excited smirk that didn’t have Mitch fooled for a second.

“I think Mommy’s got a secret!” Mitch stoked the mood. Briley and Trinley looked at each other and smiled, then laughed. “What did you do, Mrs. Robertson? Another blanket for the collection?” He winked, accustomed to the tameness of his wife’s gifts.

Rebekah straightened, feigning offense. “I’ll have you know, Mr. Robertson, I’ve found something quite interesting.” Mitch’s interest peaked, he made his way to his wife and pecked her on the cheek. The girls exchanged anticipatory glances.

“Really? Interesting, eh?” Mitch teased.

Rebekah stepped aside, revealing the jewelry box situated on the table behind her. Mitch cocked his head and crossed his arms, delightfully surprised at the find. The girls approached with wide-eyed intrigue at the mysterious gift.

“What is it mama?” Briley asked.

“It’s a jewelry box!” shouted Trinley. They ran to the box, turning it and eyeing the detail. Mitch gawked over their tiny heads at the intricacy of the carvings, amazed.

“Wow, babe. This is interesting! Look at you!” he said. Rebekah sat back and watched her family revel in her not boring, very eccentric gift.

“Does it open?” asked Briley.

“Of course, silly!” replied Trinley. She thumbed under the lid for the latch and opened the top.

“Be careful, girls, it’s very old!” warned Rebekah, expelling the full breadth of her knowledge about the box that was – probably – very old.

Briley joined in and aided her older sister in opening the wings of the box, exposing multiple dangling necklaces and an array of bracelets. “WOW! Thank you!” they shouted.

“Full of jewelry, too?” Mitch raised an eyebrow. Rebekah sat up and stared quizzically at the box.

“Well, I don’t remember anything *in* the box. Except an old picture...” she approached the hanging jewelry and pawed it, examining the end pieces. Seemed cheap enough to her, only tied up tiny rocks and assorted charms.

“Can we keep it all mommy?” begged the girls.

Mitch shrugged. Rebekah shook her head and figured the situation was strange enough at the shop that she must’ve missed it, “Of course – you girls have fun!”

The girls were trying on the treasures, laughing and pointing. Mitch’s face went white, only Rebekah noticed.

“Mitch?” she asked.

“Don’t move. Girls, get behind me,” his voice was stern. Mitch held his hand out and got low, almost on his knees. “Easy boy,” he repeated, as calm as he could. Cooper stood at the threshold of the home, teeth bared and growling. He pawed at the floor and gnashed his teeth, drooling and angry.

“My god, Mitch, what’s wrong with him?” Rebekah jumped back, knocking the jewelry box onto its back, exposing burn markings on its underside. The girls were no longer laughing; the family was terrified at Cooper, whose eyes sharpened as drool seeped through bared teeth.

“Take the girls upstairs, Bek,” Mitch directed.

“But, Mitch he’s – ”

“Just do it Rebekah, now! Slowly,” Mitch’s voice raised. There was nothing on this earth before now Mitch felt the need to protect them from so rigidly, especially not Cooper.

“What’s wrong with him, Daddy?” Briley eeked out between sobs.

“I don’t know honey, go upstairs with mommy now. Take your present and you guys just get upstairs. Cooper is sick and Daddy needs to help him. Right, Bek?” Mitch’s tone indicated to his wife it was time for teamwork.

“That’s right honey, Cooper is sick. Let Daddy help him. Girls, up we go,” she said. Rebekah shewed the girls upstairs as Trinley gathered the jewelry box. Cooper got within striking distance – at least, what Mitch thought could be striking distance for an otherwise docile pet. Mitch slowly positioned himself between his family and the new Cooper. The girls made it upstairs, and Mitch heard their footsteps in the bedroom.

Cooper’s eyes shuddered, he shook his head, looked down. He began panting, licked his lips and slumped down right where he was, groaned sadly and put his head down on the floor. He approached Cooper slowly, hands out in the least threatening position he could think of, and

Cooper wagged his tail. He lifted his head from the ground and panted more, tail wagging, eyeing Mitch with the loving and gentle eyes he always had.

“What’s gotten into you, boy? Huh? Something scare you outside?” Mitch asked, in his silly voice reserved for dogs and babies. He sat next to Cooper and petted his head, scratching behind his ears, watching the wagging tail subside as Cooper laid his head back down and enter into his typical lazy half napping state. Mitch sighed, breathing easier. He hadn’t even realized how high his heart rate had gotten until it began to settle. He took in the moment, rationalized that something outside had spooked Cooper big time. Big time.

* * *

The next day the snow melted. Rebekah came home to the murky, brown soup left after a melt and decided it had a beauty all its own, no more shoveling snow. She hated that snow shovel. The girls had gone down the street to Mrs. Duncan’s house to play, and she welcomed a cup of coffee. Cooper’s episode had scared her, but Mitch assured her it was just something in the cold and wintery air that had spooked him. She believed him, but still planned to avoid the animal and found solace in that the girls were away.

She walked in the quiet house looking forward to a little solitude waiting for Mitch to come home. She shed her coat and boots, took off her scarf, and opened the closet door prepared to just toss them all in a heap rather than hang them up neatly, she’d get it later. Instead, the sight of the bloody and bent snow shovel made her drop the items right at her feet. The sharp base was caked with a maroon muddy mass, and fur and dirt were stuck to the syrupy mess amidst the blood spatter. Rebekah reached in, disgusted, and lifted it from the closet; the wet mess sluffed off a chunk of...something...onto the floor when she moved it.

She looked down closely at the foul-smelling mass and followed the trail of blood to the back kitchen door. Still holding the shovel, she slowly walked the trail. It led outside. She opened the back door and screamed. Cooper's head lay only a few feet from most of his body, the golden burn of his coat now darkened by the carnage.

Mitch came home a few minutes later and Rebekah was sitting silently in the kitchen, processing. The shovel was perched on the kitchen table. "Bek," he started, "what the...what is this? Where are the girls?"

"The girls are at Mrs. Duncan's. You're lucky they aren't here to see this," she began to tear up. "You said something fucking spooked him, Mitch. I know it scared you, but you didn't have to," she began crying uncontrollably now, "you didn't have to *chop* him to pieces. What is wrong with you?"

Mitch didn't know what to say, so he just started. "Honey," he said, "I did not hurt Cooper."

"Well he looks pretty *fucking* hurt to me," Rebekah said. Her tears began to dry in the face of his defiance. It had to be him. She surely didn't do it and the girls...

"My god," said Mitch, staring out the back door. "Where are the girls, Rebekah? Where's Bri and Trin?"

"They're at Mrs. Duncan's," Rebekah wasn't sure if that was a question or an answer.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

It wasn't the sound of hysteria buried in Rebekah Robertson's tone that worried Mrs. Duncan the most; it was the silence when she told her she hadn't seen the girls all day.

* * *

Snow had fallen again, and melted, and fallen again and melted as two more winters had passed. Mitch was having a hard time convincing Rebekah they needed to move, to at least try to put this behind them in order to accept the reality in front of them – that their girls were gone. The first step, they decided, was downsizing. Piles of discarded items in the garage, some of the girls' toys they didn't play with anymore, clothes that hadn't fit Mitch since college; they found the energy to participate in the Spring community yard sale, and mostly all they got were sad looks as their neighbors passed their house in silence.

A couple that had moved in a few doors down asked the mail man on his rounds about what happened. "Their girls were never found, one day just up and vanished. No bodies, no damn nothin. Darndest thing. On the heels of some awful mess about a chopped up dog, too. Poor couple never been the same since," he gave his mustache a wrinkle and told them all he knew.

As awkward as it was, now that they were armed with the sordid truth, the Berkleys perused the items in the driveway. They passed head nods and sorrowed glances but never got a return. Mitch and Rebekah Robertson just sat there, watching. But everyone knew what they were thinking about.

Mr. Berkely saw the corner of the box behind a pile of old hockey jerseys. He slid them aside and almost cracked a smile at the intricacies of the box's carvings, but quickly recovered decorum amidst the grieving. He ran his fingers along the carved scenery, amazed at the detailed scenes of nature and horses. He turned it in his hands, surprised at its light weight. On the bottom of the box he noticed burn markings, but patterned and deliberate.

"Shelia, you gotta see this," he half whispered and tried to hide his excitement at the find.

“Henry! Keep your voice down did you hear what that man said these people had *been through!*” Shelia replied as she quickly rushed to the side of her husband. She and Henry looked closely at the markings on the bottom of the box.

“It almost looks like writing...like runic or something super old,” Henry said as he held the box even closer to his face, squinting and tracing the markings with his fingers.

“Oh Henry it’s a damned jewelry box, stop making such a fuss,” Shelia had enough. She took it from him and set it on the table and began to fumble through some old vinyl records in a bin. Henry slowly uncoupled the latch and raised the hinged top, and then swung open the box’s winged sides.

“Heh. You’re right, look at that,” he partly smiled. Fanciest carved jewelry box he’d ever seen. “What’s this?” he asked, eyeing a small paper corner protruding from the center of the box’s row of tiny drawers.

“Oh what now, Henry?” Shelia asked.

Henry slid out a polaroid from the box, and he and Shelia stood staring at it.

“Henry...” Shelia’s eyes welled up. She stood tall and gathered herself. “Give that back to those poor people. This instant.”

Henry did so. He turned and walked the photograph to Rebekah who didn’t look up until he was right in front of her. “Ma’am? I think this is yours,” was all he could muster. Rebekah tilted her head and retrieved the polaroid from a man she never met in a world she didn’t know anymore. Her ears perked, she could barely make out a sound familiar to her, but she couldn’t place it. A distant bell, BLING DING da-ding.

Rebekah nearly knocked Henry over when she jumped out of her chair. She took the photo and her screams were heard throughout the neighborhood.

“THESE ARE MY CHILDREN!!! THESE ARE MY CHILDREN!!” Rebekah cried, and fell to her knees.

In the black and white photo, little Briley and Trinley Robertson were situated in cute Sunday dresses in what looked like an attic. Cooper laid at their feet, his tail up and tongue playfully hanging out of the side of his mouth.