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Abby Sweet



## Bury the Tote Lady



The Tote Lady lives in a pink house on the north side of the city. In her yard the grass is dead but there are always flowers in bloom that never need to be watered, pruned back, or weeded; and if she wanted to, she could pluck up an entire bouquet at once and stick it into a vase without worry or care because the flowers are fake.

From the outside, the pink house looks small, but inside there are several tiny rooms. The Tote Lady has made it this way, but not by wood and nails. Most of the walls of the tiny rooms are made from cardboard and newspapers, mounds of magazines, countless cookbooks, heaps of second-hand clothing. They are so tiny in fact that only their tenants can fit inside. These rooms are special spaces and this is the way the Tote Lady has made it. This is the only way she will have it.

The largest room is for the Dinosaurs. The largest of the Dinosaurs is a plush T-rex that stands three and a half feet tall. His nylon fur is red and green. He shares the room with six other T-rexes, fifteen kinds of Long Necks, eighty two kinds of Triceratops and over a hundred other Dinos of all species from all eras that are all under an inch long. Somehow a Mammoth found its way into their room as well.

Around a corner of apple-box cardboard is the room for all that is Disney: one shelf holds Christmas Mickeys that are either ice skating, ringing a bell, wearing scarves, or singing carols. Dumbos and Mouse Detectives collect dust in a corner while Beauties, Beasts, Foxes, Hounds, Little Mermaids, Poison Apples, and Pinocchios all keep their places and they keep the Dinosaurs out.

Between the *National Geographics* and the Fly Swatters live the Rubber Ducks: a variety of sizes, shapes, and kinds. No Rubber Duck left behind. All Rubber Ducks Welcome, Rubber Duck Crossing. They must share part of their room with the Towels. It's only natural.

Across from the Shampoos (which are neighbors of the Towels) reside the Babies. The kind that have huge blinking eyes, the ones that wet their pants; some are always sleeping and others do not have arms while a few have had their hair cut off. But they are all beautiful and blessed. The Tote Lady shakes her finger and tells them, "Don't you leave this room, and don't let anyone in. We are safe here."

She has a kitchen, she does cook. After all, she has some good cookbooks. And as she cooks she admires the Salt and Pepper Shakers that cover the shelves of her cupboards that she has removed the doors from. There is salt and pepper in every Shaker in the house, and she uses a different set every day. In the kitchen, there is a high chair for every Baby. All of the small Babies sit in one together. "They never eat their food," The Tote Lady tells the Cats, all seven of them. They are good listeners and their fur can be collected to make very nice yarn. Unlike the other residents, however, the Cats are quite mischevius. They rip up the walls and chew on the Dinosaurs. They sleep on the Towels and spray the Babies. Each Cat has his own tower to guard, which makes The Tote Lady feel safe. One Cat was becoming very round.

Hidden behind a broken piano, under photo albums of faces that look familiar to The Tote Lady, between achievements and acknowledgements, within dreams she could touch, there is a whole woman.

The Tote Lady always has her favorite Ones with her. From her Tote hangs a mess of miniature Beanie Babies, somewhere around thirty it seems, and every sunny day she walks to the little store to fill up her gigantic thermos with a fountain beverage. The little store used to have mini Beanie Babies, but The Tote Lady bought all of them. Or stole them. The kid saw her do it, but he had also seen an entire ocean in her once-good eyes. He thought that her short white hair made her look older than she actually was. He pretended not to notice, and The Tote Lady always purchased her beverage.

"Today is cold," says The Tote Lady as a whistle of wind sneaks under the Dinosaurs' window. She reaches into the Scarf room (next to the Angels) and pulls out a pink one with long tassels that get tangled around the ring on her finger. She wraps the

scarf several times around her sagging neck and cheerfully puts on her coat. It is turquoise with big brown buttons and it has four pockets: one for Kleenex, one for lucky pennies, one for gloves and the last for a pen. She blows a kiss to the Babies and heads out the door.

While walking, The Tote Lady thinks; she tries so hard to remember whose faces are in the photos pressed neatly into pages in the albums. She wonders how her house became so lived in. Maybe today she will remember (she has before) and all of the tenants will finally move out and let her be. They take up so much space and they threaten to bury the albums. Bury The Tote Lady.

Blink! White lashes press together; the sun is pulled behind a cloud and a crow laughs about it. A black kitten mews and cries for its mother, but she does not come. Cracks in the sidewalk turn to canyons. Sudden pain between her eyes causes The Tote Lady to stop. Her feet turn to stone and she remembers. The Tote falls to the ground and the thermos rolls out into the street. All of the Beanie Babies start crying. The crow laughs louder and the clouds tie up the sun and cover his mouth. "My love!" cries The Tote Lady. The crow flies away.

Tomorrow, the Tote Lady will die. Everyone will say, "We knew she would, eventually." The fire truck and ambulance will dramatically sound their sirens and neighbors will gather on the cracked sidewalks next to green cypresses and watch. They will not wonder how she died. It will read in the paper as, "Hoarder Found Dead in Pink House with Fake Flowers." The kid will read the article while a bum shoves a bag of Drum into his pants. Beanie Babies will still be crying and the Cats will disappear. Tenants of the pink house will be confiscated and its windows will be boarded up while the crow laughs and laughs and laughs at how the pink paint peels and falls upon the fake flowers.