

WAR BENEATH THE TREE

By Gene Wolfe

It's Christmas Eve, Commander Robin," the Spaceman said. "You'd better go to bed or Santa won't come."

Robin's mother said, "That's right, Robin. Time to say good night."

The little boy in blue pajamas nodded, but he made no move to rise.

"Kiss me," said Bear. Bear walked his funny, waddly walk around the tree and threw his arms about Robin. "We have to go to bed. I'll come, too." It was what he said every night.

Robin's mother shook her head in amused despair. "Listen to them," she said. "Look at him, Bertha. He's like a little prince surrounded by his court. How is he going to feel when he's grown and can't have transistorized sycophants to spoil him all the time?"

Bertha the robot maid nodded her own almost human head as she put the poker back in its stand. "That's right, Ms. Jackson. That's right for sure."

The Dancing Doll took Robin by the hand, making an arabesque penche of it. Now Robin rose. His guardsmen formed up and presented arms.

"On the other hand." Robin's mother said, "they're children only such a short time."

Bertha nodded again. "They're only young once, Ms. Jackson. That's for sure. All right if I tell these little cute toys to help me straighten up after he's asleep?"

The Captain of the guardsmen saluted with his silver saber, the Largest Guardsman beat the tattoo on his drum, and the rest of the guardsmen formed a double file.

"He sleeps with Bear," Robin's mother said.

"I can spare Bear. There's plenty of others." .

The Spaceman touched the buckle of his antigravity belt and soared to a height of four feet like a graceful, broad shouldered balloon. With the Dancing Doll on his left and Bear on his right, Robin toddled off behind the guardsmen. Robin's mother ground out her last cigarette of the evening, winked at Bertha, and said, "I suppose I'd better turn in, too. You needn't help me undress. Just pick up my things in the morning."

"Yes um. Too bad Mr. Jackson isn't here, it bein' Christmas Eve and you expectin' an' all."

"He'll be back from Brazil in a week-I've told you already. Bertha, your speech habits are getting worse and worse. Are you sure you wouldn't rather be a French maid for a while?"

"Maize none, Ms. Jackson. I have too much trouble talkin' to the men that comes to the door when I'm French."

"When Mr. Jackson gets his next promotion, we're going to have a chauffeur," Robin's mother said. "He's going to be Italian, and he's going to stay Italian."

Bertha watched her waddle out of the room. "All right, you lazy toys! You empty them ashtrays into the fire an' get everythin' put away. I'm goin' to turn myself off, but the next time I come on this room better be straight or there's goin' to be some broken toys aroun' here."

She watched long enough to see the Gingham Dog dump the contents of the largest ashtray on the crackling logs, the Spaceman float up to straighten the magazines on the coffee table, and the Dancing Doll

begin to sweep the hearth. "Put - yourselves in your box," she told the guardsmen, and then she turned off.

In the smallest bedroom, Bear lay in Robin's arms. "Be quiet," said Robin.

"I am quiet," said Bear.

"Every time I am almost gone to sleep, you squiggle."

"I don't," said Bear.

"You do."

"Don't."

"Do."

"Sometimes you have trouble going to sleep, too, Robin," said Bear.

"I'm having trouble tonight," Robin countered meaningfully.

Bear slipped from his arms. "I want to see if it's snowing again." He climbed from the bed to an open drawer and from the open drawer to the top of the dresser. It was snowing.

Robin said. "Bear, you have a circuit loose." It was what his mother sometimes said to Bertha.

Bear did not reply.

"Oh, Bear," Robin said sleepily a moment later. "I know why you're antsy. It's your birthday tomorrow, and you think I didn't get you anything."

"Did you?" Bear asked.

"I will," Robin said. "Mother will take me to the store."

In half a minute his breathing became the regular, heavy sighing of a sleeping child.

Bear sat on the edge of the dresser and looked at him. Then he said under his breath, "I can sing Christmas carols." It had been the first thing he had ever said to Robin, one year ago. He spread his arms. All is calm, all is bright. It made him think of the lights on the tree and the bright fire in the living room. The Spaceman was there, but because he was the only toy who could fly, none of the others liked the Spaceman much. The Dancing Doll was there, too. The Dancing Doll was clever, but . . . well-he could not think of the word.

He jumped down into the drawer on top of a pile of Robin's undershirts, then out of the drawer, and softly to the dark, carpeted floor.

"Limited," he said to himself. "The Dancing Doll is limited." He thought again of the fire, then of the old toys the Blocks Robin had had beforehand the Dancing Doll and the rest had come, the Wooden Man who rode a yellow bicycle, the Singing Top.

The door of Robin's room was nearly closed. There was only a narrow slit of light, so that Robin would not be afraid. Bear had been closing it a little more each night. Now he did not want to open it. But it had been a long time since Robin had asked about his Wooden Man, his Singing Top, and his "A" Block, with all of its talk of apples and acorns and alligators.

In the living room, the Dancing Doll was positioning the guardsmen, and all the while the Spaceman stood on the mantel and supervised. "We can get three or four behind the bookcase," he called.

"Where they won't be able to see a thing," Bear growled.

The Dancing Doll pirouetted and dropped a sparkling curtsy. "We were afraid you wouldn't come," she said.

"Put one behind each leg of the coffee table," Bear told her. "I had to wait until he was asleep. Now listen to me, all of you. When I call, 'Charge!' we must all run at them together. That's very important. If we can, we'll have a practice before hand."

The Largest Guardsman said. "I'll beat my drum."

"You'll beat the enemy or you'll go into the fire with the rest of us."

Bear said.

Robin was sliding on the ice. His feet went out from under him and right up into the air so that he fell down with a tremendous BUMP that shook him all over. He lifted his head, and he was not on the frozen pond in the park at all. He was in his own bed, with the moon shining in at the window, and it was Christmas Eve . . . no, Christmas Night now . . . and Santa was coming. Maybe he had already come. Robin listened for reindeer on the roof and did not hear the sound of any reindeer steps. Then he listened for Santa eating the cookies his mother had left on the stone shelf next to the fireplace. There was no munching or crunching. Then he threw back the covers and slipped down over the edge of his bed until his feet touched the floor. The gold smells of tree and fire had come into his room. He followed them out of the room, ever so quietly, into the hall.

Santa was in the living room, bent over beside the tree! Robin's eyes opened until they were as big and as round as his pajama buttons. Then Santa straightened up, and he was not Santa at all, but Robin's mother in a new red bathrobe. Robin's mother was nearly as fat as Santa, and Robin had to put his fingers in his mouth to keep from laughing at the way she puffed and pushed at her knees with her hands until she stood straight.

But Santa had come! There were toys-new toys-everywhere under the tree.

Robin's mother went to the cookies on the stone shelf and ate half of one. Then she drank half the glass of milk. Then she turned to go back into her bedroom, and Robin retreated into the darkness of his own room until she had passed. When he peeked cautiously around the door frame again, the toys-the New Toys-were beginning to move.

They shifted and shook themselves and looked about. Perhaps it was because it was Christmas Eve. Perhaps it was only because the light of the fire had activated their circuits. But a clown brushed himself off and stretched, and a raggedy girl smoothed her raggedy apron (with a heart embroidered on it), and a monkey gave a big jump and chinned himself on the next-to-lowest limb of the Christmas tree. Robin saw them. And Bear, behind the hassock of Robin's father's chair, saw them, too. Cowboys and Native Americans were lifting the lid of a box, and a knight opened a cardboard door (made to look like wood) in the side of another box (made to look like stone), letting a dragon peer over his shoulder.

"Charge!" Bear called. "Charge!" He came around the side of the hassock on all fours like a real bear, running stiffly but very fast, and he hit the Clown at his wide waistline and knocked him down, then picked him up and threw him halfway to the fire.

The Spaceman had swooped down on the Monkey; they wrestled, teetering, on top of a polystyrene tricycle.

The Dancing Doll had charged fastest of all, faster even than Bear himself, in a breathtaking series of jetes, but the Raggedy Girl had lifted her feet from the floor, and now she was running with her toward the fire. As Bear struck the Clown a second time, he saw two Native Americans carrying a guardsman-the Captain of the guardsmen-toward the fire, too. The Captain's saber had sliced through one of the Native Americans, and it must have disabled some circuit because the Native American walked badly. But in a moment more the Captain was burning, his red uniform ablaze, his hands thrown up like tongues of flame, his black eyes glazing and cracking, bright metal running from him like sweat to harden among the ashes under the logs.

The Clown tried to wrestle with Bear, but Bear threw him down. The

Dragon's teeth were sunk in Bear's left heel, but Bear kicked himself free. The Calico. Cat was burning, burning. The Gingham Dog tried to pull her out, but the Monkey pushed him into the fire. For a moment Bear thought of the cellar stairs and the deep, dark cellar, where there were boxes and bundles and a hundred forgotten corners. If he ran and hid, the New Toys might never find him, might never even try to find him. Years from now Robin would discover him, covered with dust. The Dancing Doll's scream was high and sweet, and Bear turned to face the Knight's upraised sword.

When Robin's mother got up on Christmas Morning, Robin was awake already, sitting under the tree with the Cowboys, watching the Native Americans do their rain dance. The Monkey was perched on his shoulder, the Raggedy Girl (programmed, the store had assured Robin's mother, to begin Robin's sex education) in his lap, and the Knight and the Dragon were at his feet. "Do you like the toys Santa brought you, Robin?" Robin's mother asked.

"One of the Native Americans doesn't work."

"Never mind, dear. We'll take him back. Robin, I've got something important to tell you."

Bertha the robot maid came in with cornflakes and milk and vitamins for Robin and cafe au lait for Robin's mother. "Where is those old toys?" she asked. "They done

a picky-poor job of cleanin' up this room."

"Robin, your toys are just toys, of course--"

Robin nodded absently. A red calf was coming out of the chute, with a cowboy on a roping horse after him.

"Where is those old toys, Ms. Jackson?" Bertha asked again.

"They're programmed to self-destruct, I understand," Robin's mother said. "But, Robin, you know how the new toys all came, the Knight and Dragon and all your Cowboys, almost by magic? Well, the same thing can happen with people."

Robin looked at her with frightened eyes.

"The same wonderful thing is going to happen here, in our home."