

Puppet Shop

by Hallie Nelson

Once upon a time, a boy with skin as soft as pinewood strolls out of his cottage with nothing but a yellow linen cap and some pieces of bread. Neither one of his parents tried to stop him from leaving: It wasn't unusual for their son to take a very sudden walk. They knew he always came back eventually. He wandered aimlessly around town. Occasionally, someone would show him a freshly caught fish or shiny olives, trying to convince him to buy it. The only things he would be particularly interested in buying were one of the toys from the old puppet shop near the edge of town. Whenever he walked by the shop, he'd stop to look at the shelves filled with funny looking soldiers and their tiny wooden guns.

As he got to the end of town, he spotted a little opening in the woods he'd never noticed before. He looked to the sky. It wasn't quite dark yet; he could make it back home in time for dinner. Besides, a walk through the woods couldn't possibly hurt, regardless of how many times his parents warned him against it. He noticed there wasn't any visible trail, so he littered small pieces of his bread to make one as he walked through the woods.

The sound of birds and the soft crunch of leaves beneath his feet seemed to mesmerize him. He felt a thrill from unfamiliarity, not knowing what's ahead. He walked until his legs felt like they were made of wood, stiff and tiring to drag on and on. Just when he figured he should turn back and lay in bed, he saw an unfamiliar structure. It sat in a clearing, the way it glimmered in the light that showed through the leaves almost made it seem like it was coated in sugar. The gable roof of the building seemed to be made of marshmallows, and the chimney strongly mimicked candy cane. He felt drawn to it, like he was attached to a string that was pulling him to the small building. When he got closer, he saw pastries and bread peeping at him through the glossy window. The window looked so polished he could see his reflection. His dark curly hair matched the chocolate pastries in the window, and his bright blue eyes seemed to blend in with the blueberries.

Just when he went to knock, hoping to get a taste, an old lady opened the door. Her gray hair spilled over her shoulders and framed her round face perfectly.

"Oh, my dear! Do come in! It's been a while since I've had a customer like you," she quickly said. Before the boy could protest, she pulled him in and sat him down on a comfy chair. "I have the tastiest treat for you to try!"

"I'm afraid I've got no coins to spend, sorry!" he claimed. The weight of coins in his pockets seemed to feel heavier at that moment.

"It's on the house," she handed the boy the pastry, "and you are just the perfect subject to partake of this. You are so innocent and shapeable at this age after all. Your parents must want you to stay this way forever..."

"Pinocchio."

"Yes, Pinocchio, lovely name. You know, many people have complimented my pastries. People have even described them as *magical*. Go ahead! Take a bite! I'm sure you'll love it, I'm the best in town-" Pinocchio began to tune her out as he realized she probably wouldn't be able to stop her mouth from running.

Her smile was kind, but there was just something so unusual about it. Pinocchio hadn't even heard of this bakery before, and there wasn't anyone else here but him. He looked around and noticed that it really was only the window filled with treats. Everywhere else seemed to be like a normal house, other than the large furnace sitting strikingly lonesome in the kitchen area. As the lady rambled, her eyes remained trained on him, only being taken off him when she glanced down at the pastry he was holding. His stomach practically begged for the pastry, the sweet smell of lemon tempting him. He was all about risks, so he began to eat it despite everything. He was three bites in before his eyelids became heavy and his mouth struggled to

move. He started to fall forward at the sudden loss of control over his body, but he was caught by the lady before he hit the floor. She gave a wicked cackle as she brought him to the back of the shop. Her sweet smile quickly became quite sour to Pinocchio.

Dread pooled at his stomach as she put him away into a box. The box was just his size, and it was cushioned with soft pillows along the inside. The musky smell seemed to consume him inside the box. Pinocchio wanted to scream, to kick, to yell, to do anything. But he couldn't. It felt as though there were strings holding him in place, but he couldn't break from them. The lid closed over him just as he felt the lady pick the box off the table. He appeared to be on a rocking boat as he swayed in the box with every step the old woman took. He could faintly hear the same sound of crunching leaves he'd once loved, now the sound was more sickening to him. The thought of not knowing what lies ahead seemed more sinister to him than exciting.

After what felt like forever, he heard a door open. Pinocchio could barely make out hushed voices as the sound carried through the box.

"How splendid! Thank you, Rosina," an old man commented in a gruff voice. Pinocchio thought he sounded a bit familiar. "We shall wait seven days to give the family their gift. That should give us enough time to fix him up." Bright lights framed giant, scarred hands as they opened the box and lifted Pinocchio. If Pinocchio could move, he's sure his eyes would have popped out of his head. The man who pulled him out of the box was the puppeteer in town, Geppetto. His wrinkles dug deep into his skin; his eyes seemed sharper and more chilling than Pinocchio ever remembered. Geppetto turned Pinocchio around in his hands, observing him.

He heard the old lady agree with him, who he now assumed was Rosina. Rosina chattered an impossible amount about how lucky Geppetto was to have her, and what she put in the pastry. Pinocchio recognized some of the ingredients Rosina mentioned. Sugar and flour were obviously recognizable, but he had never heard of torpefying lemongrass. *That plant she put in that pastry must've made me like this*, Pinocchio realized. He could recall the sour taste of lemon in the pastry.

It honestly sounded like she was using big words to impress Geppetto. Pinocchio briefly recalled a friend he used to have years ago, Gretel. She would often come running to him with a big, new word she learned. She was quite a bookworm, and Pinocchio felt as if she had all the knowledge in the whole world. Her brother, on the other hand, wasn't very interested in knowledge. Rather than being interested in finding a new word, he'd try to find new bugs or a new buddy to play with for the day. His gift of finding new things didn't seem so impressive as he himself went missing. Their family moved away shortly after that, and he never saw either of them again. Pinocchio's head seemed to spin the more and more he thought, *Is this what happened to Hansel?*

He snapped out of his thoughts as Geppetto propped him up on a stand. The man ushered Rosina out of the puppet shop, who was still babbling. He shut the door behind her very quickly, and locked the door.

"This is one of my favorite parts, you know," Geppetto said suddenly. He began to slowly close the curtains over the windows. "I get to immortalize your innocence, your naivety," he walked back to Pinocchio and slowly observed him. "You're not the first to become perfect. I've had many others brought to me." If he wasn't already, Pinocchio was sure he would have been paralyzed in dismay. He felt he needed to cry, but the tears wouldn't come.

Time didn't feel real to Pinocchio. The only indication that time was passing was the rising and falling of the sun. Day by day, Geppetto would use paints and string to make him appear like any other puppet in the shop. His once soft skin now strongly resembled genuine pinewood, firm and polished. The strain of a forced smile on his face felt dishonest and disoriented.

On what Pinocchio assumed was the seventh day, he was put back into his box. The same motion of being carried around made his stomach twist and knot. He heard a knock on

wood, a door. Wood, the woods, pinewood--he never hated wood more in his life. His thoughts seemed to drift around, disorganized and numb. He heard a door open.

The next thing that was opened was his very own box. His vision was filled with the sight of his parents. Their eyes were filled with as much shock as there were tears.

"A gift." The puppeteer said, "I know how hard it is to lose someone dear to you, but at least you will have a perfect, permanent reminder of your child this way."