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EUGENE

Jerry was a builder until he decided to retire and rented a caravan in a holiday park. He had always been good with his hands and offered to do a bit around the park like repairs and gardening which the manager was very grateful for. The work was enjoyable and kept him busy; and twice a week he played darts as a member of a local team; but lately he was finding it harder to get to the meetings and, in fact, hadn't played with other people for ages. Despite this he still practised using a dart board he had hung at the end of his annex. The trouble was that the annex was only a canvas shelter fixed to the side of his caravan, and when his darts missed the board they would make holes in the material. That, he figured, wouldn't please the manager of the park. Then he found a piece of old carpet and put that behind it which fixed the problem. Even so, on windy days, the wall of the annex that the carpet was hung on blew around a bit moving the dart board, so it wasn't ideal.

One day, Jerry was unpacking a new piece of machinery that had been delivered to the park. He was going to toss the wooden crate it came in on the rubbish dump when he had an idea. Knocking it to bits, he took the pieces back to his caravan and began cutting the wooden planks to the right sizes and nailing them together to construct himself a solid backing for his dart board. To avoid having to lean it up against the wall of the annex, he put on two planks as legs and nailed two more for feet so it was free-standing. Finally the dart board went on.

Jerry was very pleased with his efforts, and as he was admiring his work he was thinking that it looked rather like a wooden person with a dart board for a head. Then he noticed something he had missed before. Painted on one of the legs was a name – Eugene. He couldn't imagine what it meant. Maybe it was the name of the company that had made the machine that came in the crate? Whatever, the name did have a certain ring to it and he decided that was what he would call his dart board. Opening a small box, he took out a set of darts and, preparing to throw, said: "Right, Eugene, let's play some darts."

The new dart-board setup worked well, even when the wind was up, and Jerry played a few games every day when he had finished doing his jobs around the park. Eugene might have enjoyed the company, had he been a real person; which, of course he wasn't. He did know things, though, enough to be concerned when Jerry failed to come out of his caravan one morning. As the day wore on there was still no sign of Jerry. The park manager also thought it strange that his odd-job man hadn't fronted up for work and he came round to see why. Knocking on the door of the caravan and receiving no answer, he went in to discover Jerry lying on the floor with his eyes closed. Having checked that the old man was still breathing, he phoned for an ambulance.

Eugene just stood there at the end of the annex watching the ambulance crew taking his friend out on a stretcher; and after that nothing else happened. Jerry didn't return and no-one came to visit. Days passed and Eugene was increasingly worried about Jerry. He would have loved to be able to ask someone, anyone, what had happened to him; but, of course, he was

unable to speak; and he couldn't move either, so he was just stuck there, all alone. It was a sad state of affairs for him, but that was soon to change.

Some men arrived one day and began doing things in the caravan. "Shame about Jerry," said one, "But at least he's out of the hospital now." Another commented: "Yeah. The manager said they put him in that Autumn Days Nursing Home and he wouldn't be coming back. Pity really, but there you are."

Eugene listened as the men talked. It seemed they were preparing Jerry's caravan so that it could be rented to someone else, and Eugene was hoping the new people might like to play darts which meant at least he would have company. Then he was moving and one man was saying: "It's getting late. We'll chuck this on the rubbish dump and take it down to the tip tomorrow along with all the other stuff."

So, this was to be Eugene's fate; not that he knew what a rubbish dump was, nor a tip; but it didn't sound good. Soon he found himself lying on a pile of junk – old doors, broken furniture and loads of worn-out tyres; definitely not a nice place to be. As night closed in, the wind began blowing stronger. Rain pelted down too, a new and unpleasant experience for Eugene who had spent all of his life so far in the comfort of Jerry's annex. There was worse to come. Lights were flashing in the sky much brighter than the one that Jerry had rigged so he could see to play darts after dark; and every so often there were terrible bangs, cracks and rumbles. Unable to move, Eugene couldn't seek shelter; he could only lay there getting soaked. Then a bolt of lightning struck the rubbish dump: FLASH !!! WACK !!!

Something had hit him and it really hurt, a lot more than darts sticking in his board which he was used to. This was... well, he didn't know because he had never felt anything like it before. Then a small voice was moaning: "Ouch!. That made my handlebars sort-of tingly."

"Hello," Eugene called, and that surprised him because he had never been able to speak before. "Is someone there?"

"It's me, Trixy," replied a squeaky voice. "I used to be Amanda's tricycle until I got rusty and her parents threw me out. What I don't understand is how I can speak. All I could ever do before was ding my bell."

"I couldn't talk either," said Eugene; then exclaimed: "Woah! I can move my leg!" He started to wriggle, shuffling on his back to the edge of the pile of rubbish he was laying on. Eventually he was able to stand upright. Turning so that he could look at the pile of junk he asked: "Where are you?"

"Under some smelly rubber things," said Trixy.

Eugene peered at the rubbish pile and as he turned, a light shone wherever he looked. It seemed that whatever had hit him not only made it possible for him to speak, but it had caused his dart board to glow. Using his very own light, he scanned the junk, pausing when Trixy said: "You just passed me. Go back a bit." Eugene did, and Trixy told him: "That's it. I'm under here."

"Can you move?" Eugene asked.

Following a few grunts, the tricycle said: "Not much. These things are too heavy. Can you get them off me?"

Eugene pondered: "I suppose I could try, but I haven't got any arms. I might be able to kick off what's on top of you."

"I guess that will have to do," said Trixy. "But remember I'm under them, so please be careful."

It took him a while, first kicking his way through the stuff at the edge of the pile; but soon enough Eugene made it into the heap of tyres and was able to free the little tricycle which rolled out on its own. "Gee, you're smaller than I thought you'd be," commented Eugene.

"Not like you," said the tricycle, "You're pretty huge, and funny looking. What are you?"

"I guess I'm a dartboard on a stand," he replied. "My name's Eugene; at least, that's what Jerry called me."

“Who’s Jerry?”

“Jerry’s the man who made me,” Eugene said.

Trixy pondered for a moment. “So, he’s like your Dad. How come you ended up here – did he chuck you out same as they did to me? If he did, he’s not much of a Dad.”

“Nothing like that,” Eugene started, then became little sad as he went on to explain: “Jerry came over sick and they took him to hospital; but they reckon he got better and now he’s in some place called Autumn Days Nursing Home.”

“Oh, I know *that*,” declared Trixy. “We used to go there to visit Amanda’s nanna.”

“Is it far,” asked the dartboard, “Only, I’d really like to see Jerry again.”

“Not far at all,” said the tricycle. “Just down the road a bit. Close enough for Amanda to ride me there. I could take you, if you want.”

The strange pair set off: Trixy leading and Eugene clumping along behind, lighting the way with the glow from his dart board. It was probably fortunate for them that it was still raining and this kept most people indoors. What anyone would have thought seeing a dart-board stand and a child’s tricycle without a rider making their way along the darkened streets didn’t bear thinking about. “Not long now,” said Trixy as they turned a corner. Very soon they were approaching some big gates with a large sign above. “This is it,” said the little tricycle, “Autumn Days Nursing Home. Where will we find Jerry?”

“I have no idea,” confessed Eugene. “I’d imagine he would be in a bedroom sleeping now. Maybe we should find somewhere to hide; then wait for morning. Those trees at the end of the garden might do.” The pair continued on along the path towards the clump of trees; but before they reached it they heard voices and stopped.

Eugene started to speak. Trixy whispered: “Shush. We don’t want them to find us; and you’d better turn your light off.”

There was nothing Eugene could do about the light because he didn’t know how, so he just kept quiet, as did Trixy. The voices got louder as a man and a woman came closer. Judging by what they were saying they were checking for storm damage. “It all seems okay,” said the man. “Let’s go and get a hot cup of tea, I’m freezing.”

“Hang on a minute,” said the woman. “There’s something up ahead. It’s glowing.” A few more paces and they were standing in front of the odd couple. “It’s a dart board and a kid’s bike,” she commented unnecessarily, “What are they doing here?”

The man shone his torch over the wooden stand, pausing when the light fell on one of the legs. “Well I never!” he declared in disbelief. “See what it says – Eugene. This must be what Jerry’s been moaning about. I thought his mind was going and he was just rambling; but it seems he did have a dart board called Eugene after all. I wonder how it got here?”

“Maybe someone at the holiday park brought it for Jerry,” said the woman. “Not sure about the bike, though.”

“Hmmm.” The man pondered for a moment, then made a suggestion: “You know how Jerry’s been since he came here. He just sits in his room muttering about missing Eugene, not interested in doing anything. Maybe if we... Yes,” he said eventually. “Give me a hand to get these into the workshop. We’ll show them to Jerry tomorrow and see if it perks him up.”

Eugene and Trixy didn’t let on that they could make it to the workshop on their own. It was, they thought, for the best. Even when Jerry was brought in next morning they stood still and kept quiet. Actually, Jerry did enough chattering for both of them: “Great to see you again, mate. You must have known I’ve not been myself; but it will be different now, I promise. As for your little friend, she looks a bit shabby, but I can fix that; then the kids can ride around on it when they come to visit...”

He got to work straight away: taking Trixy to bits; oiling the moving parts; and sanding the rust from her frame before spraying it with pink and purple paint. Then he put her back together again. As a final touch, one of the ladies staying in the home tied some pretty ribbons on the handlebars. Trixy was ready for active service.

Jerry enjoyed being busy with his hands again and continued making things in the workshop like benches and tables to be put in the gardens. At the end of each day he played darts; not on his own anymore, but this time with other people. Someone had suggested that he ought to make a better backing for his dartboard. Jerry's answer was: "No way! There's nothing wrong with Eugene. He's my mate, and he's right for me just as he is."

And so it was to be. Eugene was happy; and Jerry was even happier because he didn't have to play darts on his own anymore. And after being ridden around during the day by visitors' children, Trixy was brought in to spend each night sitting next to her very special friend. The pair talked about what they'd seen and the folk they'd met; and both had to admit that coming there was the best thing that had ever happened to them. Naturally, they only spoke to each other when they were alone because they figured human people simply wouldn't understand. Not that they needed to: it was enough for them and everyone to know that a dart board and a child's tricycle had brought happiness to lots of people.

Over a few days Eugene discovered that if he thought very hard he could turn his light off and on; so, as well as being something that brought Jerry and the others a great deal of pleasure, he was also able to bring an occasional secretive glow to The Autumn Days Nursing Home; when there were no humans around, of course.