

Mr. Patched Bear

In a place deep amongst the shelves of a young child, was a world where teddy bears roamed. Years ago, the bears had gathered to form a community. One where they could learn and talk and play and work. A replica of the human world surrounding them, where new bears would be added by a toddler from time to time. It was always peaceful, within the bookshelves. The playgrounds had a cheerful hum and the air was cozy. Dust layered over the hills of abandoned Legos like snow. The streets were lined with fairy lights, and each day the cubs would be let out of school to play. They would pass a small wooden hut on their way home and laugh at the size of it. The house was owned by Mr. Patched Bear, an old citizen made out of stitches and buttons and sections of floral pillowcases. The adults would utter remarks like *scary. Don't talk to him. Weird.* And the young cubs would ask, *is Mr. Patched Bear really a bear? If he isn't a bear, then why is he called that?* Mr. Patched Bear led a lonely life where all the bears would avoid him whenever they could. Every night the old bear would come out to the park benches and read the daily newspaper. One evening, the young bears were getting ready to leave the swings when one of them spotted Mr. Patched Bear perched upon a wooden seat.

“Why don't you go on and snatch Old Patched Bear's paper there? I dare ya,” she said. The teddy bear wore a smug expression. She pushed her friend, who reluctantly agreed, towards the elderly bear. Before he reached Mr. Patched Bear, the friend removed his glasses and shoved them swiftly into his pocket.

“Hey Mr. Patched Bear! I didn't know you could read with that button as your eye,” the friend teased. He brushed some dirt off the bench and took a seat next to Mr. Patched Bear. The old bear set his newspaper down and faced the cub.

“I can see perfectly normal,” Mr. Patched Bear said with fluency, “better than you I'd assume.”

“No, sir. I have the eyes of a hawk,” he sat a bit straighter, a bit taller with his chest high. Mr. Patched Bear eyed the young bear's spectacles jutting out from his coat. He chuckled to himself as he reached for them. The cub's eyes darted to the newspaper, then to his snickering friends, as Mr. Patched Bear rested the glasses onto the bridge of his nose. Mr. Patched Bear followed his eyes to the folded-up paper, and he handed it to his acquaintance. The young bear took the magazine and flipped through its pages. One was filled with delectable tarts and another with burgers and fries. All of a sudden, the young bear grew hungry, and his stomach began grumbling. Mr. Patched Bear recognized the sound and smiled once again.

“I was just about to head home to bake those tarts. You and your friends are welcome to come along now,” he said. The bear nodded and ran to his friends.

“Mr. Patched Bear has offered to bake me tarts! He said you guys can join too,” the cub explained, and scuttled back to the old bear, who had already stood up.

One friend chimed in, “oh, yes, and let’s all leave him before he notices.” A nasty smirk grew upon her face. The group started walking towards the two bears ahead of them, staying a good distance behind.

As Mr. Patched Bear walked towards the small wooden hut, the young bear realized that he was walking with a cane. It reminded him of someone.

“Mr. Patched Bear, you have the same cane as my grandpa! And my friend's grandpa, and— and everyone else who has a cane,” his eyebrows came together, “why do you have the same one?”

“Well, we all got them from the same shop,” Mr. Patched Bear replied.

“Oh, I didn’t know you went to the same shop as everyone else. I thought you were... never mind.”

“Different? I am, but still, all bears go to the same stores.”

“Yeah, everyone knows that. I just thought you weren’t a bear. Or at least a typical one,” the young cub felt a pang of guilt as he watched Mr. Patched Bear’s face sadden. But before he could take it back, the fabric near Mr. Patched Bear’s heart ripped a little, and a ball of cotton stuck out. He gasped but Mr. Patched Bear waved it off.

“I can sew it back together when I get home,” the old bear said. The cub couldn’t tell if Mr. Patched Bear was smiling or not. The two finally arrived at a small wooden cabin. They turned around, but the young bear’s friends were not there anymore.

“I guess they decided to go home. Come on in then,” Mr. Patched Bear said. Little did he know, they were all hidden behind his rosemary bushes. The two bears settled down in the kitchen and got started on the desserts.

“Mr. Patched Bear,” the cub said after the pastries were inside the oven, “how come you’re the same as all the other bears in this town, but everyone’s scared of you? You’re so kind, no one has ever offered to bake me tarts.”

Mr. Patched Bear put one arm around the little bear’s shoulder and led him to a framed painting that was caked in dirt. He grabbed a handkerchief from the coffee table next to him and wiped off the grime. The cub saw that the painting in front of him wasn’t a painting at all. It was a mirror. He could see himself in it and Mr. Patched Bear who was more than double my size even though he was kneeling.

“I look so different from you,” Mr. Patched Bear replied, showing off his colorful patches of fur and many stitch patterns.

“Why, Mr. Patched Bear, why do you look like that?”

The elder bear shrugged his shoulder, “It was so long ago, I was the little girl’s favorite toy. She would carry me around everywhere— and drop me everywhere too— and then her dog would chew me up. But she would always give me to her grandma to mend back together. And

when she grew too old for me, I was stored away on this very shelf with all your grandmas and grandpas, and the rest is history.”

The two bears stood there in silence for a while. Outside, the little cub’s group of friends gathered beside the small window of Mr. Patched Bear’s home. His oven beeped and they saw the hungry little cub bolt to the oven. Mr. Patched Bear retrieved the tray of treats, and the air filled with warmth and sweetness. After letting them cool, the two bears took one each and tried them. The tarts were toasty and sugary, like the ones grandmas would make on a Christmas night. The little cubs outside scurried home at the sounds of their parents' calls. After finishing all the treats that Mr. Patched Bear and the cub made, they made their way back to the young bear’s home. Before the cub opened the door to his house, he turned around to Mr. Patched Bear and hugged him goodbye. The old bear was taken aback but wrapped his own arms around the little bear after a few moments. When they separated, the cub realized that the tear above Mr. Patched Bear’s heart was nowhere to be seen. Inside the house, the little cub crawled atop his sofa and watched Mr. Patched Bear walk back to his small cabin through his window.

The next evening, Mr. Patched Bear strolled to his daily reading spot. But instead of an empty bench, he found a box sitting on its surface. The bear took a seat, carefully opened the lid, and saw a note that read:

For Mr. Patched Bear

- *Cub, and friends*

Below the note were a dozen mini tarts, like the ones he had made with his little friend the previous night. Mr. Patched Bear looked up at the playground and saw the young bear and his friends piled onto the merry-go-round. The little cub turned around and saw Mr. Patched Bear with his gift. He waved and the two exchanged smiles. After those two days, Mr. Patched Bear would always bring the cub and his friends to his home and teach them how to bake different sweets. And the following days, the cubs would prepare the same thing for him to eat while reading his newspaper. Some of the town still thought of Mr. Patched Bear as a strange outcast, but the kids from the park slowly became his family and the group of bears lived happily ever after...

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The old lady closed the book in her lap and smiled at her granddaughter, who was tucked cozily into her blankets. The little girl looked up at her grandmother and asked, “so was Mr. Patched Bear really a bear?”

“Yes, darling, he was always a bear.”

And with that, the grandmother rose from her rocking chair, kissed the toddler goodnight, and turned off the lights. She closed the door behind her, and the little girl hugged her own patched teddy bear.

“I’ll never let anyone think you aren’t a teddy bear,” she whispered to her stuffed toy. And they slowly drifted to sleep together.