

MISSING

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.34

It's their first night together since she left.

Isaac pretends to watch the television while waiting to hear her key in the door, the sound to say she's come home. He'll be gracious to her when she returns, he tells himself. He'll welcome her back. On the floor, his four year-old son William sets up a line of cowboys across the carpet. He asked after his mother earlier and Isaac told him that she'd gone away to see a sick friend. The boy had narrowed his eyes a little, as if he knew that he was being lied to.

'What about my birthday party?' he asks, staring up at his father.

'That's your mum's department,' grunts Isaac.

'But mum's not here,' says William.

Isaac says nothing and changes the channel as the boy reaches into the shoe-box and takes out a handful of Indians, liberated to face certain death and humiliation.

She's run off with a doctor. They've gone to Canada.

'Mum said I could have a clown,' announces William. 'She said -'

'Don't mind what your mum said,' grunts Isaac, sinking to the floor beside his son and picking up some of the figures. William bites his lip nervously. His father is disturbing a delicate negotiation between the natives and the invaders. 'Who's this one then?' he asks.

'Wild Bill Hickok,' says William.

'And this?' he asks, selecting a feathered warrior.

'Geronimo.'

'Which one's Buffalo Bill?'

'I lost him,' says William with a shrug.

Isaac stares at him, confused. There are maybe thirty identical cowboys before him. There's no way to tell any of them apart. 'What do you mean you lost him?' he asks. 'He's your favourite one, isn't he?'

'I lost him,' repeats William.

'Who's this then?' he asks, holding out a closed fist and the boy peels the fingers back to reveal one of the cowboys inside. 'It's him,' says Isaac. 'It's Buffalo Bill.'

The boy takes the figure and examines him carefully. 'That's not him,' he says.

Isaac sighs. He wonders whether this is it for him now. Bringing up the boy alone. Just the two of them. He walks over to the window and peers outside, staring up and down the street, desperate to see her. When he turns back, the boy is crying; the sudden, unexpected nature of the tears unsettles him.

'What's the matter?' he asks, stepping towards his son again but treading on the Indians as he crosses the floor, the snapping plastic halting the tears for a moment before they recommence even louder than before. He wonders whether he can leave too. Whether it could be that easy.

'Stop crying, son,' he implores, taking out his handkerchief to wipe the boy's eyes. 'We'll find him. He has to be around here somewhere.' They look for a long time, saying nothing to each other. It gives them something to do. It fills the silence.