

## Collector's Syndrome

By DeiArecia Washington

Joey's eyes were glued on the hands of the clock. The hour hand was already in place at the three; now the minute hand had to hurry to the half-mark and he was released from the grasp of Mrs. Anne, the worst 6<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher in history.

'No doubt Leo's watching the clock too', Joey thought.

Putting his hand in his pocket, he could feel the cold, palm sized tin, full of cards he couldn't wait to show off after school. Lost in his daydream, Joey missed when the bell rang and he found he was a minute behind schedule. Rushing through the halls, he made his way up the stairs and to Rm. 750, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade newspaper room. Normally, the newspaper teacher, Mr. Barker, was in at 3:45 with his editor and other students, so Joey and Leo had to make their meetings brief. But Leo wasn't here and the minute hand, going faster than before, moved to ten past 3:30.

"Come on, Leo. Why are you always late?" Joey asked himself as he paced around the room, his curly blond hair bobbing and his palms growing sweaty.

"Boy, you are a nervous Curtis, Joe," Leo moseyed himself in at 3:42.

"Leo, we can't be here when the newspaper club comes in! Of course I'm nervous."

"Well let's begin!"

Joey shook his head, "I hereby call the collector's club open. Do you have anything to present to the floor, Leo?"

“Yes, I have an announcement! Today, the final installment of my Monster Ball collection is coming in. So I’m having a party Saturday. Club members only and BYOS, by the way.”

Joey was excited; Leo had been working on completing the whole gaming collection of their favorite show, Monster Ball, for 2 years. Now saving up snack money, allowance and random change has paid off.

“Congratulations, Leo! Now I am going to present my new baseball tin,” Joey eagerly pulled out the tin from his pocket, but Leo didn’t seem so thrilled, “what’s wrong, Leo?”

“Well, it’s nice but what about the cards? Who do you have?”

“I don’t know. It’s not open.”

“You never open those things,” Leo whined a bit.

“Of course not, we’re collectors. We-” Joey’s speech was cut off by the gruff voice of Mr. Barker and Terry, editor of the newspaper, down the hallway.

“Club dismissed!”

The boys grabbed their things and sped out the school, which was near empty except for the school sports teams, official after school clubs and general students who didn’t want to go home. Leo and Joey lived a great deal from the school, a good mile, but they liked walking home as it gave them extra time to have their meetings.

“I wish we could go to your house for our club,” Leo said.

“Yeah, but my parents always say no,” Joey imagined his parents at home, dusting and cleaning. He sometimes entertained the thought of having friends over, but Joey knew there was a part of him that didn't like company.

As the two walked home, the boys, mostly Joey, talked about future collecting endeavors and the future of their current collections; Leo quietly followed, talking when necessary. He was more so enjoying the brisk, fall breeze that blew into his wild black hair. Joey pulled his hood up and covered his mouth with his scarf. Leo never really cared for bundling up for the cold seasons; instead, he pulled off his backpack and ran into the park near their houses.

“Come on, Joe! There's no one here! We have the whole park to ourselves,” the energetic 11-year old hopped on the monkey bars and swung across.

“I can't,” Joey replied, “I don't want my tin to get messed up or dirty or something,” Joey climbed up and down the jungle gym for a solid fifteen minutes until he rested on the ground tired.

“Are you ready yet?” Joey asked near impatient.

“Yeah, yeah,” Leo got up dusted the wood chips off his black pants and grabbed his backpack.

“Man, you're no fun,” Leo whined.

“You're still my friend,” Joey replied quickly.

“Somebody has to or else you'll be a grumpy little boy and grow to be a grumpy old man,” Leo laughed and ran ahead as Joey chased after him.

“Ha, I got home first!” Leo had the great luxury of living a hop, skip and a jump from the park, while Joey had to walk further to the cul-de-sac. After watching Leo get attacked by his sisters, Joey continued to go home. Everything about his house was clean; the wood floors were shiny with new wax, while collectible trains in their boxes were displayed on shelves. Lemon furniture polish welcomed Joey as he ran his fingers on the plastic couch. He could see his father in the Collecting room, carefully repairing a rare 1967 Timothy Lionel train. Joey made sure not to make a sound as he went to his room. Joey's room was unlike most boys' room; neat and clean and without a single sock out of place, the only furnishings were a bed, nightstand and a bed in uniform black. On the walls, Joey had posters of old movies and replicas of major painting in frames. Joey began his afternoon routine by placing his bag on a chair near his door, replacing his shoes with slippers and changing into his home clothes.

“Leo wasn't as ecstatic as I hoped,” Joey said to himself as he took the tin from his coat pocket. He put it on his desk and turned his computer on.

“Password? Mint condition, of course,” Joey logged in and clicked the notebook icon for today's thoughts:

“Today is November 15<sup>th</sup>

Leo completed his collection of Monster Ball today! I'm going to his house tomorrow to have a look at it, so I hope mom will make her famous Snicker doodles!

Dad's '67 train is coming along well. He always says that trains are a real collection and I hope he gives me one of his.

Sincerely, Joseph Pelter”

Joey logged out of the computer and began his homework like the good student he was until dinnertime, when his mother drove the family to the Grande Soiree so that she wouldn't have to dirty her newly cleaned kitchen.

Early that Saturday morning, Joey bolted out of his bed and hurried to the bathroom to prepare for Leo's unveiling. His father was still up from last night with the train while Joey could smell the cinnamon Snicker doodle cookies for Leo's house. Dressing casual, yet neat, Joey zipped up his favorite blue sweater and belted his Velcro shoes before going out of his room to leave.

"Good morning, mom," Joey slinked out of his room and tip-toed to the kitchen to avoid disturbing his father.

"Hello, son," Mrs. Pelter bounced from behind the counter, her red polka-dot dress flaring around, "I have your snacks ready to go and it's your favorite," Mrs. Pelter kissed Joey on the head and handed him the container.

"Thank you mom," Joey couldn't wait until he got to Leo's house. He skipped as he thought of putting the Monster Ball games neatly away on shelves and eating the cookies.

Joey knocked on the window of Leo's room and practically hopped in place on the porch to wait.

Leo slugged to the door, his eyes, not fully adjusted to being awake, opened to find Joey and a smile made from a dentist's hard work.

"What are you doing here?" Leo said in a monotone voice.

"I'm here for the Monster Ball party, duh."

“I know that, but why are you here so early? It’s not even nine,” Leo rubbed his eyes. His hair stuck up every which way.

“I got so excited; I just couldn’t wait one minute longer. Plus my mom made us snacks.”

Leo’s eyes perked, “Snickers doodle?”

“Our favorite.”

“Come on in. Just be quiet. My folks are still sleep.”

Joey bounced inside, “Aren’t you excited?”

“Yeah, but-” Leo’s words were drowned by his yawning. Taking the container, he put them in the kitchen. Joey sat down in the living room while Leo got ready.

Leo’s house differed from Joey’s. The Robson family was collectors like the Pelter’s, but instead of having complete collections on display, everything was thrown carelessly about and handled every way. Plus the collections were basically junk from the pawn shop Mr. Robson owned. Joey noticed the couch he was sitting on was the one Mr. Robson got from a storage auction a few years back.

Leo walked out of the room in lounge clothes and yawned as he sat next to Joey. Grabbing the remote, he turned on his Saturday cartoons.

“Aren’t we going to see your collection?”

“No. Not until Pirate Gordon goes off,” Leo said in a trance.

Joey sighed and slumped in his seat. He hated Pirate Gordon; however there no real reason why. Leo always said Joey only hated it because he was trying to act grown up and he might accidentally enjoy it. Also Pirate Gordon was the only show Joey had ever seen that didn't have much merchandise to collect, except for the bedding that Leo owned. Today's episode was about how Gordon's first mate was learning to share. "Sharing is caring" was the main theme and frankly, Joey didn't care. After an agonizing 45 minutes, the show was over. Joey jumped up and smiled broadly at Leo.

"Next?" he asked.

"Next is a cup of Joe."

Joey's eyebrows knitted together, "you drink coffee?"

Leo didn't say anything; instead he shuffled to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of Kangaroo Joe's orange drink and poured it into a Super League's glass. Joey couldn't take the suspense. His breathing deepened and he didn't remember when he folded his arms or began tapping his foot. Leo was normally calm in the morning, but this was a bit much.

"Ok, quit nagging me," when Leo threw the cup into the sink, Joey rushed over to make sure it didn't break. Meanwhile, Leo started down the hallway to his room.

Joey was quite surprise to find that Leo had not prepared for the Monster Ball collection. His bunk bed, top bed and bottom couch, was covered with clothes, some that looked cleaner than the dingy hoodie-jeans combo Leo had on now. Game systems crowded the TV and a tower of boxes hid behind Leo's closet door.

“Here, let me move this and that,” Leo pushed the clothes from the couch to the floor for Joey and began pulling out the boxes, “Here is the moment you have waited 2 years for. I present my Monster Ball game collection!”

Leo grabbed his scissors to open the first box, which contained a handheld game console and the very first Monster Ball video game.

“Mint condition,” Joey speechlessly whispered. He gingerly picked up the game and held it like a newborn baby.

“When you’re finished hand it over, okay?” Leo rolled his eyes and turned his attention to the console. Picking it up, he started opening the package, producing a sound Joey never heard before.

The ancient box popped open, swirling dust in its new owner’s face.

Joey came out of the game induced trance to see the console box on the floor and Leo holding the system in his hands.

“What are you doing?” Joey asked.

“I’m opening my new Monster Ball game system. What did it look like?”

“You did what?” Joey slowly stood up and his eyes widened, exposing his bright green eyes.

His palms grew sweaty and he began to breathe heavily, not in a displeasing way like before.

This time it was hyperventilation.

“You broke it,” Joey whispered.

Leo looked down at the console, "it looks fine to me."

"No, no, no," Joey shook his head, "you broke the first rule of collecting."

"What's that?" Leo asked flatly.

"You don't know?!" Joey's shock changed gears. His voice cracked as his eyebrows displayed anger.

"Calm down, Joe. I told you my parents are still sleep."

"Calm down?! You just broke the first law of collecting and you don't even know what it is!

Rule one: Never open the package! It's so simple!"

"Then what's the use of having this stuff if you're not going to enjoy it?"

"You want to play with it? That's just stupid!"

"No, what's stupid is buying something you never play with like those baseball card tins. I bet the cards are nothing but junk, but you'll never know because you won't open them!"

Joey growled as he stormed out of the room. Leo's dad, Mr. Robson, met him by the kitchen, bewildered and sleepy.

"What's the hub-bub boys?"

Joey stared at the man resembling a 6 foot Leo. They shared the wild hair, droopy brown eyes and slouchy look.

“Leo opened the package of the Limited edition Monster Ball game console,” Joey thought Mr. Robson would care, but he didn't even blink.

Joey continued out the door and down the cul-de-sac. His father wasn't home, so he didn't have to sneak by, although he wouldn't have anyway. Leo did the unspeakable action of opening a mint condition item for fun! Sitting in his desk chair, he noticed the game was still in his hands. Thankfully, it wasn't damaged, as Joey would have gone into another rage.

Instead he held it close to his chest, repeatedly whispering, “Its okay. You're safe here.”